SimPPL

I'm a postdoctoral researcher, nonprofit founder, and spun out a startup, each focused on rebuilding digital trust globally.

<https://x.com/swapneel_mehta>

<https://linkedin.com/in/swapneelm>

SimPPL

<https://simppl.org>

New York

SimPPL is a nonprofit that works on rebuilding trust on the social internet operating in 6 countries to combat misinformation.

Founder and President

I focus on the research and development of responsible AI tools to improve digital trust. I have trained several hundred undergraduate students to advance digital literacy and online safety. I work with them to implement technological and policy interventions with 20+ partners from 6 countries, and drive sustainable change.

Boston University and MIT

https://truthmarket.com

Boston

MA

I am at both Business Schools (Questrom at BU, Sloan at MIT) working with 6 PIs as a postdoc.

I conduct behavioral economics research, designing online experiments to test mechanisms that limit online misinformation in digital marketplaces. This research is conducted alongside 15 undergraduate mentees, 3 Ph.D. students, and 2 Masters students that I lead. We test our hypotheses with human participants in two-sided marketplace experiments for online advertising.

New York University CSMAP

https://csmapnyu.org

Center for Social Media and Politics at NYU researching technology and democracy issues including better policy regulation for social media.

Graduate Researcher

Conducting mixed-methods research into the measurement of the causal effects of interventions against online misinformation on social media platforms.

Twitter

https://x.com

Popular micro-blogging social media platform.

Conducted research in collaboration civic integrity, misinformation, and recommender systems teams to develop their state-of-the-art early civic misinformation detection model.

https://torrvision.com

Oxford

Research Laboratory of Prof. Philip Torr, working on machine learning and recently on misinformation based in the Information Engineering Dept.

Visiting Researcher

Modeling the harms from networked disinformation operations on recommender systems in order to preempt them from affecting social media audiences.

**Fellowships**

Atlantic Dialogues Emerging Leaders

Policy Center for the New South

Casablance

Morocco

Supporting emerging leaders and younger professionals connect with those in power now including Presidents, PMs, and foreign ministers.

Google Cloud Research Innovators

Google

Technical workshops and interactions with leaders from the Google community and other researchers from the sciences and technology.

Startup Bootcamp

Future Founders

Chicago

Nonprofit startup accelerator providing hands-on workshops, VCs, networking events, and mentorship to young founders under 30 years of age.

Responsible AI Affiliate

All Tech is Human

Speaking engagements and leadership on focus areas relating to my expertise in algorithmic audits, responsible computing, and artificial intelligence.

Please describe the mission of your work and/or organization, including the communities served, the programs and services provided, and its impact․ Describe your specific role and responsibilities and the specific impact of your work․ (200 words or fewer)\*

I have taught students for the last 7 years, improving my model of "front loaded" mentorship that places a significant onus on the mentor to understand, empathize, inspire, and recognize a mentee for their personal and professional growth including opportunities to grow outside SimPPL. We have 40% women, support those from weaker socioeconomic status with laptops and wifi access, and are remote-friendly for accessibility to those who live further away and need to travel to participate. Each project we launch is led by a student as a team lead and decision-maker; and they create and train a team whom they are responsible for supporting. We empower communities of rural mothers, young girls, and journalists in the global majority; helping each learn and adapt to technological change. We do this by conducting extensive user interviews before even defining the problem, to best understand multistakeholder concerns and integrate them into viable solutions.

How does your approach empower these communities or increase their ability to thrive? How are their ideas and perspectives incorporated into the decisions your organization makes? (150 words or fewer)\*

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How do you know your work is having an impact? Please share the results you’ve measured or collected that best show the impact your work has had․ (150 words or fewer)\*

Raghav Jain, who sent me a cold invite a year ago, received 5+ US Ph.D. offers. Ananya Malik, a mentee pre-dating SimPPL, started her Ph.D. at Northeastern University. Gautam Malpani, a recent graduate, was termed "best technical mentor" by my MIT MBA students whom he guides on first-of-its kind research into Truth Social. We routinely help our top-performing students get roles outside SimPPL (a Berlin based startup, an Oxford research internship, software engineering at MIT, and referrals to tech internships). Turns out, folks almost always come back to work with us after 3-5 years forcing us to create an "industry" track for alumni to contribute in a structured manner. We started with 10 unpaid mentees in 2019, and run a staff of 22 fully-paid team members today, serving 15+ partners, with a positive cashflow from our technologies deployed to improve digital trust.

What are the values that motivate you and your work? (100 words or fewer)\*

Our values are hardwork, empathy, and innovation. The nonprofit model works for us because I personally ensure SimPPL yields more value to every individual within the organization than individuals contribute to SimPPL. Whether it is to support research exploration, publication-writing, program management, product development, or a plain change of scene with talented colleagues, SimPPL offers personalized "benefits" to each member and I take copious meeting notes from each 1:1 that I schedule with every member at least once a month to ensure alignment of member responsibilities with their growth and the organization's mission.

Selected program participants will develop action plans focused on the next phase of their work as it relates to a specific project, initiative, or challenge, which they implement post-program․ Please describe a specific project or initiative you would like to develop and/or implement after the program term or a challenge you would like to address related to your work․ (200 words or fewer)\*

A huge barrier to access technologies developed in the global north is the lack of flexibility it affords for alternative languages, which exacerbates the digital divide. In this scholars program, I will create systems that share the technological innovation from such systems, but adapt it to local languages to make it more usable by the locals. As a concrete example, I would like our students to learn how to create and deliver meaningful multimodal conversational interfaces over WhatsApp so that folks in rural areas are able to access the phone even if they are not literate. I would like to make available reliable and trustworthy information through human-in-the-loop design involving local social health activist networks in India. We have the pieces in a vector search platform we built for the UN to research audio narratives over radio data; data analysis mechanisms for real-time claims detection; and we have nonprofit partners to support on-the-ground infrastructure and needs. We will adopt an effective model for human-centered AI systems design. This technology is really important for their learning since it lays the foundations for civic deliberation, accessible user interfaces, "tip lines to report misleading claims", and a variety of applications.

The Obama Foundation Scholars Program at Columbia University seeks to support emerging leaders who have made meaningful contributions to their field and are now at a pivotal or “breakthrough moment” in their careers․ Please share with us why the Obama Foundation Scholars Program is an appropriate opportunity for you at this stage in your career and how you see the program helping you address the project, challenge, or initiative you outlined above․ (200 words or fewer)\*

Last week, I was an accidental attendee at the Atlantic Dialogues Emerging Leaders (ADEL) program: the program manager told me quite frankly that she had fought for me to be there since they already had one other Indian-origin EL. Within 3 days of the program, despite having the least continental representatives and likely also the least policy experience, I received the most votes, and was selected by the cohort of 41 from 22 countries as the leader (alongside 3 others) to represent all their voices on a panel presenting thoughts on "wider Atlantic challenges" to Presidents, Prime Ministers, foreign ministers, and leads for international development agencies like the World Bank, IMF, and the UN. Recently, I have developed an ability to ask challenging questions, raise the uncomfortable truths about uncertainty in information in rooms that need people to discuss them and as yet I am not tired or jaded enough to dismiss digital trust as an unsolvable problem. This program could not have come at a better time when I am completing my postdoctoral contract, and offers the platform for me to identify global partners to collaborate with to advance the digital literacy interventions that we're developing.

I am applying to multiple programs because there is no guarantee of being selected for any of these. But that being said, I am only applying to specific fellowships that support me in my work at SimPPL e.g. smaller grants to support the design of marketplaces to combat misinformation at Harvard's Berkman Klein Center, or think tank fellowships in India such as the Raisina Young Fellows program within which my deliverable would be to contribute a policy paper delineating digital literacy and healthcare in India; both of which directly aligns with my work described here and would only accelerate my progress with support from experts in their communities who can support SimPPL.

## Obama Foundation Scholar Script

I am a postdoctoral researcher at MIT and BU and cofounder at a nonprofit called SimPPL or simulate people. I have built a grassroots movement to advance digital trust for the global majority, by the global majority.

I train students from underserved Tier II and III educational institutions in India to build and deploy responsible AI tools with civil society in order to deploy them to several hundred users in rural India, Bangladesh, and Mongolia.

These students now train fact checkers in Mongolia to use technology to accelerate their fact-checking capacity to be an order of magnitude faster. They won an international award from Google News Initiative for such tech-enabled interventions.

Through our program, teams of students working with former social media platform leaders published reporting that resulted in Meta's takedown of accounts promoting political targeting and harassment of female political leaders in Bangladesh, that had reached over 95M online users.

But tech isn't always easy to access in the global majority. To advance digital trust, the students visited local villages and have co-created digital literacy systems to sit within local healthcare infrastructure like our WhatsApp based health literacy intervention Sakhi, deployed with over 300 families in not only Jalgaon, India, but also Dhaka, Bangladesh, planning to reach 5000 families by mid 2025. MIT awarded and incubated this innovation and UNICEF is helping scale it.

Our responsible computing training program has been awarded twice by Google and once by Mozilla making it the only program of its kind to receive three such international awards in under two years. We have published over 15 research publications at top workshops in just the last year. News about our work has reached an audience of over 200 million and we are working with India's largest Hindi newsroom to cultivate digital trust nationally.

My favorite one though is that my undergraduate mentee from India is now a technical mentor for my MBA student teams at MIT which shows the incredible capacity of this program to scale talent on a global stage.

Two weeks ago I was elected to represent the voices of my cohort in a presentation to Presidents Prime Ministers and leaders of developmental agencies about how to bridge the intergenerational divide and cultivate digital trust at an event called the Atlantic Dialogues. The Future Leaders program allows me to advance my contributions in global development and policy. I'm really excited to be able to continue scaling our work in these communities with international partners that I hope to appeal to using the platform this program provides.