Assignment 3: Individual Policy Paper

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Research Master

The Misinformation Crisis

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Executive Summary

Multifarious actors are involved in the ongoing misinformation crisis that has found its way into our modern societies: Journalists, governments, citizens in general, but also social media companies all have their role to play in the spread and creation of misinformation and disinformation.

The focus of this recommendation is the relatively new audio social media app Clubhouse developed by Alpha Exploration Co. Steps the company should be taking are highlighted to potentially profit from the mistakes of more established social media companies like Facebook and Twitter, who, in the past have received significant criticism for their handling of truth distortions on (and perpetuated through) their platforms.

The recommendation focusses on establishing community guidelines which, it is thought, could be taken as a model for the industry as a whole. Clubhouse would have, through their appropriation, the potential – even with start-up status – to occupy an ethical leadership role, precisely through the translation of learnings from its predecessors and by setting new industry standards

Eight concrete proposals are tendered, which could be introduced in phases within a 6 month timeframe.

Disinformation or Misinformation?

According to the definition by Freelon and Wells[1], disinformation "includes all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit".

Misinformation is information that has the potential to cause harm *without* the disseminators' knowledge.

Introduction

Clubhouse is a relatively new platform, launched in April 2020. The premise of the social media network is, that invitees enter into audio-only conversations, which allow the chosen users access to closed-group, conference-style events. The app is currently in its start-up infancy and still in the beta-phase of use. Despite its novelty, the app has already garnered very significant attention. Within a month of its release it was valued at 100 million dollars and more recently on January 21st 2021 reached unicorn start-up-status (a company valued at over a billion dollars) joining the ranks of Uber and SpaceX[1].

The challenge that Clubhouse and new social media platforms in general face, is that there are no readily consumable learnings enabling them to avoid some of the mistakes (and the inherent future dangers) of their more established counterparts such as Facebook, TikTok and Twitter. The central difficulty that social networks face is the potential for the unchecked spread of disinformation which they offer.

So, social media companies specifically share a causal responsibility due to the fact that they provide tools and services which can enable disinformation to be tailored to specific user groups. This has in the past allowed the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) to influence the 2016 US Presidential election through the deliberate creation of false and misleading posts on Twitter, as was reported by Special Counsel Robert Mueller, causing him to indict 13 members of the IRA. Lukito's research[2] on the IRA's behaviour found that disinformation activity on one platform (Reddit) preceded activity on another (Twitter), which she reasons suggests that a foreign country such as Russia is able to take advantage of the multi-platform digital ecology to trial and execute disinformation campaigns across multiple social media. It is therefore important to create an intervention that not only would be of benefit to a specific company but for the industry as a whole.

Theoretical Background

The Clubhouse app from Alpha Exploration Co. is right now in its beta-phase and only available for iOS users. Once an invitation (per text message) has been received, the user is able to set up an account where the participant is asked to provide a username, handle, bio and profile picture. Clubhouse's guidelines require users to provide a full name and in the regulations it is specified that the user is required to use their "real name and identity" when using the service. This use of a full name is able to aid in rooting out fake accounts – a practice known as sockpuppetry[3], when the account is used for purposes of deception.

Once an account has been created, one can start to follow users or join "clubs", which are groups of users sharing common interests. "Rooms" can be scheduled by clubs whose users can then join to listen to and interact with a conversation. The maximum number of people in a room is 5,000, which implies something more akin to a panel discussion. Depending on the changing status (participator or listener) of the user and the possibility to come into and leave the room at any point, various interactions are thinkable[4]. The room is entered as a listener, with the option to speak only being granted by the room moderator. In the main feed (referred to by Clubhouse as the "hallway") the user is shown rooms that they might be interested in joining. The app can also be exited while the audio can still be heard, the design being similar to a phone call. If a user attempts to record a conversation using the iPhone's built-in recording function, a pop-up message is issued by Clubhouse, warning the user that sharing the recording would result in a suspension from the app due to violation of Community Guidelines[5]. As for deleting the app – since not everyone might remain a fan – that is designed as a non-trivial process. In order to delete the data one has to contact the providers of the app directly[6].

The distribution of false, inaccurate or misleading information has increasingly been recognized as a problem, not only to individuals but with repercussions for society as a whole. The actors involved are various and carry both causal responsibilities (persons such as politicians may be involved in the spread of disinformation directly through creation or sharing) as well as treatment responsibilities (actors, including fact checking platforms, are involved in preventing the misinformation impact). Through social platforms, users become more connected, but those same people can easily create and disseminate disinformation in addition to their more passive information-consumer role.

As disinformation and, by extension, misinformation can be considered a social problem, governments, whilst one of the primary stakeholders, also have regulatory responsibilities in preventing the creation and proliferation of misleading, false and potentially harmful information. There are some measures that governments have already begun to implement. The supra-national European Commission presented in 2018 a roadmap for member states[7] encouraging social media companies operating in the EU to take action in five areas. This Code of Practice has required the signatories (Facebook, Twitter, Mozilla, Google and TikTok among others) to agree to:

1) Disrupt the advertising revenues of certain accounts and websites that spread disinformation

2) Enforce the transparency of political and issue-based advertising

3) Target fake accounts and online bots

4) Encourage users to report disinformation and access varying news sources, with an aim to improve the visibility and accessibility of authoritative content and

5) Empower the research community to monitor online disinformation through privacy-compliant access to the platforms' data

Clubhouse has not yet (due to its novelty) come under fire from regulators such as the EU Commission, but it should be in the interest of Clubhouse and other social media start-ups to concern themselves with self-regulation to futureproof their business model and avoid subsequent – perhaps more draconian – regulation from outside sources. Although Clubhouse has not yet been reprimanded for disinformation or misinformation they have received a cease and desist order from the German "Verbraucherschützer" as there are other data security issues that need to be addressed, due to alleged misuse of user-profile data and farming of address book entries from user's mobile phones and targeting them with ads[8].

Clubhouse has more recently worked on its community guidelines and displays a novel approach, where initiators of clubs are able to specify rules regarding community values, norms and dos and don'ts when speaking and which the user has to agree to before entering a room [9]. Such community rules potentially represent an important facet in regulating disinformation and misinformation, but there is notably no compunction to define such rules for every room and conversation. While social media start-ups are creating their own rules there are important aspects with which every social media company should be concerned in regard to dissemination of disinformation. This report's recommendations serve as such a guideline to establish community regulations.

These general regulations are not only of benefit for the community, but also for Alpha Exploration Co. as a company. If Clubhouse, for instance, could serve as an example of a social media company that has successfully navigated the misinformation and disinformation crisis, this would enable them to attract people to their platform who have been discouraged by a plethora of misleading information on other platforms.

A recent example shows why self-regulation should be of interest. The Australian parliament is currently in the process of introducing a new law: "News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code". This law will oblige Google and Facebook to remunerate the publishers if news content is routed through their sites[10]. This law is a response to complaints made by Australian news outlets about the social media sites' influence in the decline of journalism and their traditional business model. In a heavily criticized reaction, Facebook (temporarily) banned people from sharing news in Australia[11]. In the meantime both Google and Facebook have made agreements with news outlets worldwide on such payments[12]. Naughton[13] explains the importance of this legislative step as governments' influence on social media platform regulation have so far been limited and that further regulation should be implemented.

Not only governments but also the public has been sceptical towards social media platforms and their influence. Facebook especially, but also Twitter has been reported to be of concern to people for transmitting false or misleading information, whilst 40% of those asked see social media in general as the biggest source of misinformation. This stands in contrast to news sites, which only 20% see as the leading source of disinformation[14].

An Ipsos study found that concerns about misinformation on social media have increased from 69% in December 2020 to three-quarters (76%) after the US-Capitol attacks in January 2021, with those surveyed reporting being concerned that the information they receive on social media is inaccurate[15].

> **"A lie gets halfway around the world before truth puts on its boots"**
> - Winston Churchill

Practical Recommendations

While there has recently been a general Code of Practice instituted by the European Commission regarding what social media companies should do[16], there is still much in the self-regulation area that needs attention, particularly in the realm of community guidelines (and their enforcement). Thus, the overall focus of these recommendations is to provide community standards to prevent platformed offline and online harm. There are several parts of this overall strategy which should be implemented in Clubhouse.

Currently, after the chatrooms are closed, the recordings are deleted as long as no incident has been reported while the room was active. If, however, a Trust and Safety violation is reported while the room is active the audio is retained for the duration of the investigation and subsequently deleted[17].

> Clubhouse should internally retain logs of conversations for a prescribed period to aid in retroactive monitoring of misinformation and disinformation.

There is much research still needed in identifying information that is meant to harm and mislead (whether intentionally or not) and recording could aid researchers in the relatively under-researched medium of audio. Clubhouse might be reluctant to institute such a policy as the exclusivity and the live feature of the audio is one of the unique selling points of the app, drawing consumers in. It would however be of benefit to researchers to access the many hours of audio, which potentially contain audio-deepfake disinformation, which has been shared. Subsequently, researchers who begin to be able to electronically identify deepfake patterns in audio, would on the one hand receive audio content to scan for manipulations whilst ideally help Clubhouse in identifying such damaging misuse of the platform. The implication being that vocal participation on the platform contained audio that had been manipulated to impersonate a person and misrepresent their views[18].

> Clubhouse should voluntarily make available an API providing access to content for researchers and regulators.

The use of the audio would have to be made available per API with access only to registered and authorized users (researchers/regulators) with ethical clearance. Although substantial storage would need to be provided by Clubhouse – and this would certainly be tied to costs – the ethical benefits would far outweigh the disadvantages.

These guidelines should be able to function in support of claims when reports are made to ban an account. As Jiang and his research team[19] explain, the comprehensive guidelines – though often not read by users – indicate that social media companies need to focus on certain aspects more than others, though the guidelines are an authoritative source for social media platforms to implement content moderation. Jiang et al.'s[20] research indicates that the trade-off these companies make in focussing on certain aspects more than others contributes to the problems the platforms face. Particularly as these rules are not static but evolve with the platform[i] it is important to "keep an eye" on disinformation and expand the policies related to inauthentic behaviour related to misleading others on the platform. Facebook, according to Jiang et al.'s analysis[21], having the most comprehensive guidelines, lacks extended regulations against inciting violence and voter suppression.

> Clubhouse should establish comprehensive community guidelines which specifically highlight disinformation regulation as a condition of community membership and participation. There should be a special role (with dedicated regulations) for moderators, with regard to conditions of use.

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[i] Recently Clubhouse proposed dynamic rules (as defined by the moderator/founder) for each chatroom

Clubhouse has recently introduced blocking, muting and in-room reporting and the ability for moderators to end a room. This ability, however, seems to be solely in the moderator's control.

Clubhouse regulations also state that the app is not intended for anyone under 18. As of writing, there is neither age-checking nor content or topic filters present in the app[22]. There are however a number of adult topic rooms, making reporting an even more important feature. Behavioural research has led social scientists to believe that past behaviour[ii] does have an influence on future behaviour[23], leading to regulations regarding expulsion from the platform.

> Reporting abuse – as yet exclusively available to moderators – should be a feature made available to participants regardless of their role.

> Reports should compulsorily remain available after the chatroom has closed. Participants shown to be violating the guidelines must be banned permanently from the platform.

Cooperations

It is recommended for Alpha Exploration Co. to work together with existing companies / NGOs or even scientists specialised in translating audio to text, since currently the detection of misinformation and disinformation is largely limited as regards the medium of speech.

> Interventions against disinformation should be analysed and correlated across multiple platforms, enabling the self-regulation of Clubhouse help inform the self-regulation used at other platforms.

The trust in social media platforms has eroded, in part due to the Cambridge Analytica scandal[24]. As Clubhouse is relatively new and has not yet created a particular (negative) reputation for itself, a positive intervention in showing willingness to self-regulate disinformation would be a further positive for the PR of Clubhouse. It should also be the case that these rules have to be enforced from

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[ii] Although additional variables like stability of intentions, habit and context also play a role

the start without waiting for a negative event to develop on their platform. It should however be noted that Clubhouse *does* seem to be already interested in this area as they are currently hiring "Trust and Safety Specialists (Junior and Senior)"[iii][25].

In the European Commission's Code of Practice first annual report[26] it is mentioned that after the initial implementation by social media companies, measures to block fake accounts and expel users when malicious behaviour is detected, are insufficient and that malicious and inauthentic behaviour is still being detected. The EU Commission summarises that more granular information is needed, as well as more detailed insights about the detection of disinformation campaigns, including targets, levels of engagement and the issues thematised in manipulating public opinion. Regarding the protection of consumers from harm, the EU Commission concludes in the first year after instating their code of practice, that the information provided by social media platforms is not sufficient to assess the tools given to protect consumers. Particularly, the use and uptake of consumer protecting tools (e.g. YouTube's information panels to provide context) remains unknown. In addition to these detailed problems the measures are not widely available in all EU countries (e.g. YouTube's information panels are only available to users in the UK, Germany or Spain).

Algorithms

According to research by Ahluwalia[27], committed message recipients with a strong attitude are more likely to question the validity of information that does not fit their point of view in comparison to weakly committed recipients. The goal for a committed person is not to change their attitude. This indicates that it is of vital importance that people are continually exposed

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[iii] As job adverts tend not to be up for an extended period of time the screenshot of the advert is included in the Appendix

to differing viewpoints and opinions and are not fed the same type of content by the app's algorithm.

There need to be concrete efforts to minimise the possibility that false and misleading information is retransmitted.

> The algorithm recommending Clubhouse chatrooms should be extended to discourage rooms seeming to espouse conspiracy theories.

Modifying the recommender algorithm is a hybrid solution leading to the proportion of misinformation being lessened. A change to the algorithm could also be an opportunity to provide accurate information that is easily accessible – since people are already on the app – for the user. Additionally, this would aid in breaking cycles of incorrect and harmful information. One of the key aids to attractiveness of misinformation is repetition, which over time, grants credibility to the creator. The algorithmic-based approach has also been recognised by the UK government in its *Online Harms* white paper as a way to tackle disinformation and to provide a model for how social media start-up companies should conduct their business[28].

Staff

Currently there are only the two founders working at Clubhouse[29]. The staff should be expanded to include moderators that monitor the chatrooms, a particular emphasis should be placed on moderator training for disinformation-recognition and avoidance. As of now, it is noted that Clubhouse is currently hiring, including in the HR department, which would imply further staff expansion in the near future[30]. There is also the potential "market opportunity" for professional moderators for conversations that have the ability to garner a significant amount of interest, as was the case when Elon Musk went on Clubhouse on January 31st 2021 where quickly the maximum

> Moderators in chatrooms should be trained in recognising disinformation and on how to diffuse tensions while introducing alternative sources to the discussion.

number of 5000 people was reached and secondary rooms were opened to stream the conversation[31]. As opposed to fact-checking, which loses its effectiveness especially when people viewed disinformation hours or days before a fact-check is made available, the opportunity with Clubhouse could be that, being in real-time, Clubhouse's moderators could – and should – play a key role.

A two-sided message works by identifying counter-arguments that the audience is likely to have, acknowledging and then refuting them[32]. If these arguments are not directly acknowledged, people on the platform would likely come up with these counter-arguments themselves. It should thus be encouraged that moderators undergo training in conflict resolution – particularly focussing on containment of dis- and misinformation – before entering rooms to diffuse tensions between opposing views. Moderators should be encouraged to introduce different source information into the discussion when they sense that the topic of conversation has shifted too much to one side. The "moderator" could be a new role for journalists who could take up their traditional role of "being the adult" in the (chat) room, which has been largely eroded by ad hoc social-media contributors over the last few years[33].

Conclusion

As social media companies have become more lucrative over the years[iv] they have at the same time become more controversial, a response being the popular Netflix documentary-drama "The Social Dilemma"[34]. Already responding to Clubhouse's success, Twitter has begun rolling out "Spaces"[35] and Clubhouse themselves are working on launching the Android version of their app as well as exiting the experimental beta version soon[36]. Without proper regulation (be this self-regulation or through external forces such as the European

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[iv] The example of how quickly Clubhouse was able to rally investors and convince people of its product demonstrates this

Commission) the problems of one app are "replicated" in other apps aiming to stay competitive. In this scenario the welfare of people may be sacrificed as companies concern themselves with making money more than with unhealthy consumption patterns of their customers (although it is debatable if consumer well-being is the motivating force of the app as the platform's income originates from advertising revenue).

It must, in the long term, be of interest for a social media platform to provide accurate information to their consumers. The potential for start-ups to correct the mistakes of their much larger predecessors is immense, but in any case it is unwise to rely on the self-regulation of essentially profit-oriented companies who thrive in an attention-seeking economy where information is new, emotionally enticing but often repeated (a prime incubator for misinformation and disinformation).

It is expected that with the suggestions provided, new industry standards can be set in terms of community guidelines:

- Retention of logs of conversations for a prescribed period to aid in monitoring misinformation and disinformation.
- Logs are made available to ethically screened researchers (i.e. scientists, regulators or research companies / NGOs) to aid in the development of automatic detection of misinformation and disinformation in the audio format.
  - o Clubhouse voluntarily makes available an API providing access to content for researchers and regulators.
- Comprehensive community guidelines are established, where in particular it is possible for users to report harassment or other violations of the terms of service.
- Such reports are compulsorily made available after the chatroom has closed.
- Generally, proven violation of the community guidelines results in a ban.

- The algorithm recommending chatrooms is developed to focus on truthful, science-based rooms whilst discouraging rooms identifying with conspiracy theories.

- The staff should be expanded to include at least some professional moderators and to train others in skills to monitor the chatrooms and potentially act as mediators.

On a Lighter Note

A presumably impractical but perhaps most effective method of inducing logical and unbiased discourse would be to somehow reject all discussions that users try to conduct in their mother tongue and only allow discussions in a second language.

Why that? Because as Keysar, Hayakawa and Sun Gyu[37] suggest, foreign language usage is able to provide psychological distance affecting decision-making as people are less emotionally involved and display less bias. Decisions, according to Keysar et al.[38] – when made in a foreign language – are more systematic.

On verra!

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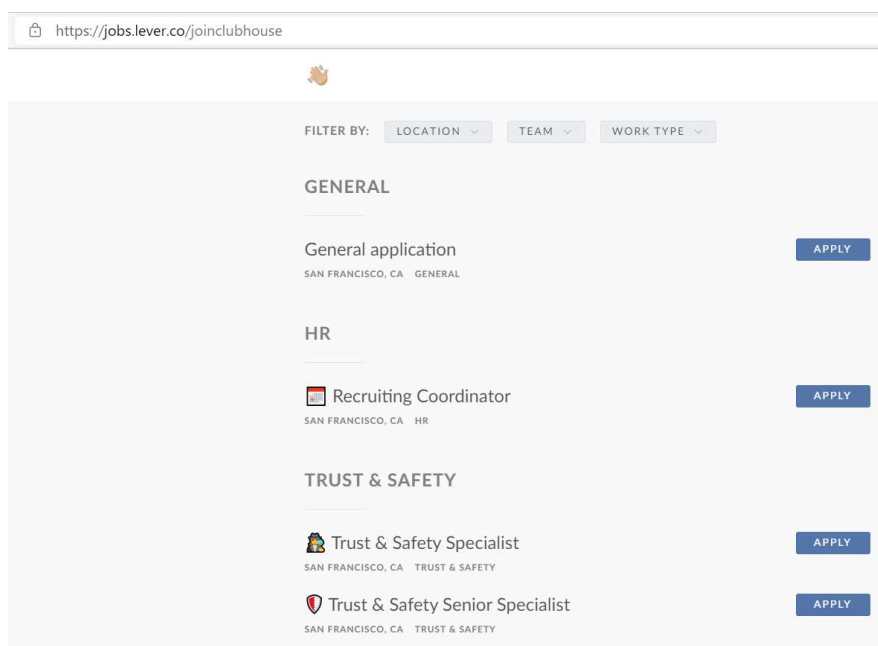a Foreign Tongue Reduces Decision Biases. Psychological Science, 23(6), 661–668. JSTOR.

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Appendix

Figure 1. Screenshot of Clubhouse Recruiting Site