

POLITICS OF DISINFORMATION

(WHY THE CURRENT APPROACHES ARE GEARED TO FAIL AND POSSIBLE
PATH FORWARD)



The Future of India Foundation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social media platforms have effectively supplanted traditional information networks in India. While large parts of the country have come online due to one of the cheapest internet costs in the world, the dialectical relationship between online content, traditional news media (especially television) and political networks means that the messages propagated online effectively touch even that section of the population which is not yet online.

This ubiquity could have been a golden moment for India - democratizing access to information, fostering community, increasing citizen participation and reducing the distance between ordinary people and decision-makers. However, social media platforms have adopted design choices which have instead led to a proliferation and mainstreaming of misinformation while allowing themselves to be weaponized by powerful vested interests for political and commercial benefit. The consequent free flow of organised misinformation (disinformation), hate and targeted intimidation has led to real world harm and degradation of democracy in India: anti-minority hate has been mainstreamed and legitimised; communities have become divided and polarised; sowed confusion in the minds of the people; made it difficult to establish a shared foundation of truth; and led to political alienation (see “Findings from FGDs”).

It is clear that **organised misinformation (disinformation) has a political and/or commercial agenda**. However, even though there is growing recognition of political motivations and impact of disinformation, the surrounding discourse in India has remained strikingly apolitical and episodic - focused on individual pieces of content and events, and generalised outrage against big tech (see “Significance of India and the Purpose of This Report”) instead of locating it in the larger political context and structural design issues. The evolution of the global discourse on misinformation too has allowed itself to get mired in the details of content standards, enforcement, fact checking, takedowns, deplatforming, etc - a framework which lends itself to bitter partisan contest over individual pieces/types of content while allowing platforms to disingenuously conflate the discourse on moderating misinformation with safeguards for freedom of expression (See “State of Play”). However, these issues are at best adjunct to the real issue of disinformation and this **report conclusively establishes that the current system of content moderation is more a**

public relations exercise for platforms instead of being geared to stop the spread of misinformation (see “Politics of Misinformation”).

A meaningful framework to combat disinformation at scale must be built on the understanding that disinformation is a political problem. This means that the issue is as much about bad actors as individual pieces of content, and that content moderation – as also content distribution - is an intervention in the political process. The report thus argues for a comprehensive transparency law to enforce relevant disclosures by social media platforms. Moreover, content moderation and its allied functions such as standard setting, fact-checking and deplatforming must be embedded in the sovereign bipartisan political process for democratic legitimacy. At the same time, it is important to ensure that a political approach to misinformation does not degrade into legal sanction for censorship at the behest of the government. Any regulatory body must thus be grounded in democratic principles of diversity, dissent, inclusion, transparency and accountability - its own and of the social media platforms (see “Recommendations”).

Given the nature of political polarisation in our country (and most others), the constitution of such a regulator and its operational legitimacy is indeed a tall task. However, the failure of a polarized political ecosystem to come to a workable consensus is not a free pass for the platforms. It is evident that platforms are responsible for the unprecedented speed and spread of distribution of disinformation and the design choices which have made misinformation ubiquitous and indistinguishable from vetted information. It is thus the responsibility of the platforms to tamp down on the distribution of misinformation and weaponization of their platform. This report argues that platforms are sentient about the users and content they are hosting and thus must take ownership of their distribution choices. Further that, just as any action against content is seen as an intervention in the political process, the artificial increase in distribution of content (amplification) too has political and commercial value. We recommend three approaches to distribution that can be adopted by platforms: a hands-off approach to content (and by extension content creators) to constrain distribution to organic reach (chronological feed); exercise clear editorial choice and take responsibility for amplified content; or amplify only credible sources (irrespective of ideological affiliation). Connected to the third choice, this report argues that the current approach to misinformation which relies on fact-checking a small subset of content in a vast ocean of unreviewed content is inadequate to the task and needs to be supplemented by a review of content creators itself. The report also recommends other allied measures to support and

improve the overall information ecosystem in the country such as linking digital literacy outreach to platform's user base¹ such that a critical mass of users undergo digital literacy training in a fixed time period (see Recommendations).

Finally, as the country with the largest youth population in the world, it is important that we actively think of how we want our youth to engage in our democratic processes and the role of social media platforms in it. There are three notable effects of social media on our politics which require deliberation: first, social media has led to a dislocation of politics across the world but especially in India - with people weighing in on abstractions online while being disengaged from their immediate surroundings (the primary site of institutional democratic processes); social media has led to a degradation of our political discourse where serious engagement has been supplanted by “hot takes”, memes and emojis; and finally, despite the apparently public nature of social media, providence of some of the most consequential interventions in the political discourse have become obscured because of opacity in technology and platform operations. Meaningful politics, especially in democracies, is rooted in local organisation, discussion and negotiation; however, the structure of social media has facilitated a perception of engagement without organization and action without consequence. This wasn't and isn't inevitable - there are more thoughtful ways to structure social media platforms which would help connect and root people in their own communities instead of isolating them locally while ostensibly “connecting” them in the virtual world. However, it is alarming that instead of moving towards more grounded communities, there is an acceleration towards greater virtuality through metaverse. Social media cannot be wished away; however, its structure and manner of use are choices we must make as a polity after deliberation instead of accepting as fait accompli or simply being overtaken by developments along the way.

¹ FOI has outlined multiple approaches for scalable digital literacy programs in a separate report

FUTURE OF INDIA

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