






Online Disinformation: From Source to Citizen - Overview

Disinformation is a multifaceted problem, does not have one single root cause, and thus does not have one single solution. This chart explains the path of disinformation from source to citizen and identifies areas for action as well as key challenges and considerations. For a more detailed discussion of each topic, click on the column headings.

SOURCE 	CONTENT 	MEANS 	PLATFORM 	CITIZEN 						
<p>Sources can be foreign or domestic. They can range from individuals to state institutions. Interests can be economic, political and/or ideological.</p>	<p>Content is designed with the goal of user engagement (clicks, views) because engagement increases reach (i.e., viral content). Content is often sensational, current, polemical, meant to incite.</p>	<p>In addition to crafting their messages with a view to maximizing clicks, publishers can use automated networks of fake accounts (botnets) and paid human influencers to make their content more discoverable on social media.</p>	<p>Social media platforms distribute content (paid and unpaid) submitted by users. They use algorithms to personalize which content is distributed to each user. The systems used, by platforms may be vulnerable, or may prioritize, disinformation.</p>	<p>In international examples, disinformation has reached large populations. As of yet, there has been little impact in Canada but sources indicate that Canada's election will likely be targeted. It is difficult to judge the impact of disinformation on public opinion and election outcomes.</p>						
<p>KEY ISSUE: How to identify and target only malicious sources?</p>	<p>KEY ISSUE: How to identify and target only problematic content?</p>	<p>KEY ISSUE: How to prevent novel means of manipulation from influencing the media ecosystem?</p>	<p>KEY ISSUE: How to establish accountability and transparency concerning the distribution/sharing of disinformation in free content and advertising?</p>	<p>KEY ISSUE: How to equip citizens with the necessary tools to select/support credible sources and content?</p>						
<p>KEY CHALLENGES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Often difficult to identify and trace the source on the internet; often mimics legitimate sources ➤ Problematic content is often shared or even posted by unwitting users who do not have harmful intent 	<p>KEY CHALLENGES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Difficult to distinguish between real versus fake, and true versus false – the truth or falsity of a statement can be a matter of opinion/subject to debate ➤ The state acting as arbiter of truth may threaten democratic principles and freedoms ➤ Difficult to distinguish "news" from other types of content 	<p>KEY CHALLENGES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The means to detect and limit many of these forces are with the platforms and transparency is a challenge ➤ These publishing technologies can have legitimate uses (e.g. legitimate news services use bots) and regulation would need to be precise to be enforced appropriately ➤ Bots do not boost disinformation on social media as much as human users do, so limiting these technologies would have a smaller impact than targeting the design of platform networks 	<p>KEY CHALLENGES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Interventions requiring platforms to define and remove disinformation may give them powers of censorship and compel them to act as "arbiters of truth" ➤ Platforms would likely have a conflict of interest, because viral content generates advertising revenue, a major source of income for most platforms ➤ Due to the rapid nature with which disinformation proliferates on social media, platforms are the only actor technically able to control distribution in time to mitigate effects 	<p>KEY CHALLENGES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ As technological progress makes disinformation harder to detect (e.g., high-quality video disinformation), even highly literate consumers will be challenged ➤ The health of the authentic media ecosystem is fundamental to addressing problems related to disinformation 						
<p>POSSIBLE RESPONSES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration across government, platforms and civil society to develop best practices to identify, monitor, document, and alert citizens to hostile "information operations." • Source transparency indicators for content, such as branding for trusted sources. • Support for public and private sector media to produce quality information and counter disinformation. • Support for innovation in the tools and training available in newsrooms (e.g., algorithmic content verification tools, digital news innovation funding). 	<p>POSSIBLE RESPONSES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multi-stakeholder fact-checking initiatives that establish content provenance by involving media, civil society and platforms. • Legislative measures that target inaccurate or misleading information created, posted, and promoted to cause public harm or for profit 	<p>POSSIBLE RESPONSES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detection and transparency around use of robots/paid human influencers to promote a certain message. This approach would allow users to understand whether the apparent popularity of a given piece of online information is the result of artificial amplification or supported by targeted investments. 	<p>POSSIBLE RESPONSES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access and transparency obligations regarding discoverability of content, advertising, algorithms, and sources in order to facilitate research and inquiry. • Discoverability obligations requiring platforms to a) integrate signals for credibility and trustworthiness in ranking algorithms; b) include recommendations of trusted content; and c) brand credible content. 	<p>POSSIBLE RESPONSES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investment by educational institutions, news media, and public authorities in media and information literacy efforts to increase awareness and understanding of media and information, digital technology, and data analytics. • Development of built-in tools/plugin and applications for browsers and smartphones, to empower users to better control access to digital information. • Support for journalism and a strong public broadcaster. 						
<p>INTENT</p> <p>Responses that involve source and/or content might consider intent. How could interventions target malicious sources/content without censoring legitimate ones?</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Mislead, misinform, or confuse</td> <td><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Legitimate cultural commentary</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Incite prejudice and intolerance</td> <td><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Satire</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Undermine democratic processes</td> <td><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Unintended journalistic mistakes</td> </tr> </table>					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Mislead, misinform, or confuse	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Legitimate cultural commentary	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Incite prejudice and intolerance	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Satire	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Undermine democratic processes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Unintended journalistic mistakes
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<p>Russia's usage of botnets and troll farms to spread disinformation on Facebook, Twitter and Reddit throughout the 2016 Presidential Election is well-documented. However, the largest study on the subject found that disinformation was much more likely to be spread by humans than bots.</p>			<p>Recent studies indicate that users on social media click/view/share false content at a greater rate than accurate content because it tends to: 1) be new and different than other stories 2) have strong emotional appeal. False content, as it is not bound by the limitations of reality, can easily create both. Disinformation exploits the interaction of human psychology with the design of these networks.</p>							
<p>Technological advances in areas such as video disinformation will require more sophisticated tools to empower citizens to navigate the media ecosystem</p>										