

## **REPORT: POLITICS OF DISINFORMATION**

This report is an attempt to cut through the morass of crosstalk and obfuscation on the issue of disinformation to make two clear points: disinformation is a political problem and any way forward must be located within the bipartisan democratic political process. An attempt to seek resolution within a technocratic or solely government framework will lack buy-in and democratic legitimacy; second, as long as amplification is driven by engagement instead of the quality of content or trustworthiness of content sources, the current content-moderation driven approach to disinformation by all major social media platforms will not stop the spread of misinformation. Platforms must either stop amplification (revert to chronological feed) or take ownership of their distribution choices.

### **SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS ARE LEADING TO REAL-WORLD HARM IN INDIA**

- Focus group discussions (with youth from 8 states): 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 (Page 15)

### **PLATFORM EFFORTS TO COMBAT MISINFORMATION ARE ANEMIC**

- Platforms deploy content moderation: outright removal of harmful/prohibited content and fact-checking with consequent mitigating measures for misinformation (reduction in distribution and/or informing users of the veracity of the content through labels )
- Fact-checking as an approach to combat misinformation applies only to a tiny subset of content actually selected for fact-checking by the platforms or the independent fact-checking organisations

### **IMPORTANT TO RESET FRAMEWORK OF DEBATE ON MISINFORMATION**

- Social media platforms have invested a lot of money to frame the discourse around misinformation and its resolution as a content-moderation problem. False Binary Between Getting Rid of Misinformation and Free Speech (Page 37)
- Platforms have made misinformation ubiquitous and indistinguishable from vetted information through turbocharged distribution and equal treatment (Page 36)
- For Platforms, “free speech is a business model”. Traditional news media is liable for published content and must thus invest time and resources to vet information before publishing. Platforms compete with traditional news publishers for advertising revenue while enjoying the double advantage of speed (to get content to users) and protection from liability (for unvetted content).

Since, advertising revenue is directly proportional to the amount of time users spend on the platforms, platforms have exploited this twin advantage to boost user engagement without caring about the deleterious impact of a surfeit of misinformation on the information ecosystem and wider democracy (Page 38)

- Platforms are Sentient and are Increasingly Moving Towards Becoming Publishers: As private corporations, platforms have - and exercise - the right to decide what content they will not host and distribute on their platform. To maximize user engagement (time spent on platform) and retain/increase users, platforms curate the distribution of content (amplification). Now platforms are starting to pay for original content to increase user stickiness thus completing their transition to a media corporation. Therefore, platforms have a “duty of care” in proportion to the harms posed by the content they are hosting along with liability linked to their distribution choice (Page 39)
- The internet has led to the transition from a content scarce to "content surplus and attention scarce" economy. Amplification is an intervention in socio-economic and political processes of society and platforms should be held responsible (Page 40)
- Content Moderation is Political and Not a Scalable Response to Misinformation (41,42)
- Disinformation is a bad actor problem (Page 42)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### POLITICAL

- Bring a comprehensive transparency law for platforms (Page 43)
- Constitute a Regulator Under Parliamentary Oversight (Page 44)

### PLATFORM DESIGN & OPERATIONS

- Platforms can have two distribution models: hands-off approach to content and constrain distribution to organic reach (chronological feed); or exercise clear editorial choice and take responsibility for amplified content. A third possible via media is to amplify only those content providers who have gone through a vetting process to ensure that amplified content has gone through some due process for integrity and quality of messaging, irrespective of ideological affiliation (Page 45)
- Reconfigure default feed to chronological feed (Page 49)
- Explore a user-driven instead of discrete pieces of content approach (credibility of creators, Page 46; label users, Page 48; review super users, Page 49)
- Develop an eco-system approach to fact-checking (Page 50)
- Scale digital literacy programs (Page 51)

**Download the full report at: <http://www.futureofindia.in/#work> (please note #) or <https://rgupta.substack.com/p/disinformationreport>**