

Media and Society

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The media is an integral part of human civilisation and has become almost as essential as our daily needs. Due to globalisation and the rise of technology, different forms of media are available to us at the click of a button. Just the Internet itself has great connective power and has revolutionised access to information, especially in the form of the media. Media greatly influences the behaviour of those who consume it as it plays a big role in shaping and creating public opinion and society as a whole. The media is a powerful tool and can be used to manipulate, persuade, pressurise and control society and the world at large on a mental, physical and emotional level.

Many people across the world view the media as an important part of their lives. This is due to the fact that it gives people access to facts that allow them to be better informed on the subjects and issues that matter to them. It also provides debate and criticism to allow people to see different issues from multiple points of view. Some governments censor the media that their citizens consume in order to sway public opinion in their favour or to paint specific situations in a certain light.

Media and Disinformation and misinformation

By aid of the media's many channels, an idea or opinion can spread like wild fire and can end up as a frontpage headline of newspapers and articles, can spread across social media platforms and can even lead to formal investigations. Generally, whether the information that is relayed in the media is true or false the public has been conditioned to believe what they are told through the media and not to question it. This makes it easy for misinformation and disinformation to thrive as many people exploit this aspect of society and use it to their advantage.

In addition to efforts by government and civil society organizations, the scientific community has a role in setting a standard for producing reputable, evidence-based information that is then communicated through these channels to the public. For example, members of the scientific community have an opportunity to increase communication around the process through which scientific findings go through extensive peer reviews before public dissemination. Upholding processes like this sets a higher standard for accountability. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, survey respondents indicated that scientists were the most trusted leaders in the community and ranked higher than government leaders, religious leaders, journalists, businesses

and people in the community.¹⁰⁶ Science can be the strongest opponent to misinformation and mistrust. Industries such as oil and tobacco face ideologically-driven resistance, including from national and international authorities, e.g., the UN and the World Health Organization. The public has the right to informed decision-making, which must be based on clear science. Legislators, interest groups, and organizations often drive discussions on misinformation while using skewed narratives for their own interests, which must be addressed by news media, private companies, national governments, and international institutions. It is also important to depoliticize facts and science and move away from “data vs. dogma.” When people only believe the science that supports their own opinion, innovation suffers tremendously. For example, nuclear energy is rarely considered in EU discussions of alternative energy, which is based more in public opinion than scientific research. Science must be objectively tested and reviewed in an open forum and should not provide an avenue to a narrow-minded view.

We have also seen that misinformation is spread through closed networks, such as WhatsApp. Some efforts have been made at the local level to provide fact-checking channels for WhatsApp. This type of on-demand service not only allows journalists to create a personal relationship and build trust with people, but it empowers them. Moreover, the fact checkers provide transparent information about the process and guidelines for fact checking so that users of this service are involved in the process and are empowered to do their own work. To make information more useful, it needs to be interoperable: usable by multiple institutions regardless of origin. In addition, information needs to be verifiable by independent sources so that more people can rely upon it. Governments can play a role ensuring that information is gathered according to commonly agreed upon standards and can establish processes for verification and oversight to reduce misinformation.

5 global trends that fuel mis/disinformation



1. Rapidly evolving technologies drive rapidly evolving definitions of misinformation and disinformation which in turn has led to declining trust in experts and institutions
1. Digital technologies have made information more accessible and shareable, increasing the speed at which lies can spread
2. The digital world erases standards we are used to in the physical world
3. Tech-enabled scale and speed make regulating the flow of information increasingly challenging
4. There is a continuing inability to address human psychology in the tech platforms and regulatory frameworks

Social media especially has allowed for disinformation to flourish as people with the objective of distorting public opinion and advancing specific agendas push false information that is out of context and meant to deceive or mislead forward. Disinformation campaigns are propagated in four key ways

- **Social engineering:** Providing a framework to mischaracterize and manipulate events, incidents, issues and public discourse. Social engineering is often aimed at swaying public opinion in favor of a certain agenda.
- **Inauthentic amplification:** Using trolls, [spam bots](#), false identity accounts known as sock puppets, paid accounts and sensational influencers to increase the volume of malign content.
- **Micro-targeting:** Exploiting targeting tools designed for ad placements and user engagements on social media platforms to identify and engage the most likely audiences that will share and amplify disinformation.
- **Harassment and abuse:** Using a mobilized audience, fake accounts and trolls to obscure, marginalize and drone out journalists, opposing views and transparent content.

Disinformation and Nicotine

Disinformation is not limited to elections but also spread on many topics from personal defamation, sales information and Catfishing to issues such as the Russian-Ukrainian war, Covid 19 and it's vaccines and tobacco as well.

There has been a lot of disinformation surrounding the topic of nicotine and the alleged negative effects that e-cigarettes have on the body. This has led to policies that disfavour harm reduction products and discussion that completely denies their benefits.

Furthermore, many governments across the world are now regulating nicotine harm reduction products in a fashion that is disproportionate to the risks associated with them. For example, in countries like India and Australia government policies are more antagonistic to life-saving harm reduction products such as e-cigarettes and vapes than to deadly combustibles.

Responsibility of the Media

Although it has been proven difficult to assign responsibility to curb the scourge of disinformation and misinformation, many believe that it primarily lies with the media. Many people believe that it is journalists who have the most responsibility to fix the problem. However, there are also many who ask the question of whether it is realistic to assign the primary responsibility for stopping the flow of disinformation to one single entity, since the problem itself is multi-faceted.

When it comes to disinformation spread on social media things become a little more complicated. Unlike some forms of media (newspaper, journals etc.) that build relationships with their readers based on reputation and carefully checking information before publishing, social media has no editors which allows a wide variety of content to spread without control. Many would then argue that responsibility here lies with big social media companies. However, it is difficult for these companies to enforce control without encroaching on their users' right to freedom of speech

Countering Disinformation to protect Harm Reduction efforts

One way that harm reduction initiatives can combat issues of disinformation is by investing in longitudinal studies on policy effectiveness. The European Union is already exploring different ways in which it can set up legal and regulatory frameworks to

eliminate or prevent disinformation on the subject matter from spreading to the level of influencing government policy.

Local journalism and civil society organizations (CSOs) can also play a key role in supporting fact-checking, media literacy, and the spreading of accurate information at a more local level. We have seen that efforts to thwart the spread of misinformation at the local level can be useful in communities where these organizations have credibility and are rooted in the fabric of the local ecosystem. It's at this level where local journalists and CSOs can become the conveyors of truth and drivers of the correction of misinformation.

5 strategies for mitigating against disinformation



1. Build autonomic response through awareness and nudging
2. The “good guys” need tools of equal or greater speed and scale
“We need smart tools that anyone can use at scale to counter the massive amount of computational propaganda.”
- Consultative Roundtable-
3. Update the limits of free speech while ensuring an “open” marketplace of ideas
4. Invest in longitudinal studies on policy effectiveness
5. Invest in an objective, credible fact-checking ecosystem

Media outlet leadership needs to be convinced to invest in these long-term efforts that will help combat misinformation and disinformation. Community leaders can use their platforms to correct or restore trust with people who have fallen victim to disinformation. We need to leverage trusted agents (local messengers) and trusted institutions (e.g. religious organizations) within the community to generate trust, build rapport, and create common ground.