MITIGATING DISINFORMATION

RESPONDING TO DISINFORMATION

Disinformation, or the practice of spreading false information in full knowledge of its falsehood, is typically difficult to mitigate against. This is due to its close interplay with misinformation: successful disinformation campaigns typically draw on conspiracy theories already present and circulating within groups.

Given the three mental processes which dispose people to believe disinformation and misinformation—intentionality, proportionality, and confirmation bias—any concerted effort to counter disinformation with facts is only likely to entrench the beliefs of the targeted community. There are, however, other tactics which could be used to mitigate the impact of disinformation campaigns: Gamification, active transparency, pre-bunking, and pre-informing.

GAMIFICATION

Gamification refers to the integration of game mechanisms and technicalities into a non-game (or physical) environment. In disinformation, this refers to the practice of encouraging 'players'—the general public—to behave in a certain way to provoke a desired outcome.

An example of this is Snapchat. The popular app has a feature in which users can apply Augmenter Reality (AR) filters to their photos, with the outcome being that they gain more 'likes' and therefore cultural capital. In 2020 Snapchat launched two AR filters in collaboration with the World Health Organization. This included one which demonstrated circles around the user's location to identify that they were adhering to social distancing measures.

In another example, Taiwan introduced a policy of "humour not rumour" to combat COVID-19 disinformation. This included releasing several tweets referring to the consequences of misinformation and disinformation such as hoarding toilet paper and openly mocking those who followed the practice. These were "memeified," with the result that many people re-tweeted with photos to prove they were not hoarding toilet paper.

ACTIVE TRANSPARENCY

Active transparency refers to the active release of information with no perceivable bias or angle. Given that confirmation bias means that any release of summaries, opinion pieces or redacted documents are perceived as evidence for conspiracy, organisations should only release factual statements in full transparency. If there is a need for redactions or the inability to release documents then these should be explained ahead of time.

The active delegitimization of independent media and think tanks pursued by disinformation campaigns is likely to decrease trust in any publications. The release of data may mitigate this.

Disinformation campaigns in the 21st century are characterised by a model of repetition involving rapid and continuous production of media and narratives. The rapid and fluid nature of these campaigns—often run by large state-sponsored organisations—make disinformation campaigns difficult to respond to individually.
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Releasing the data allows for a response to a variety of narratives simultaneously, while freeing the releasing organisation from accusations of disinformation on their part.

PREBUNKING

Prebunking refers to the practice of providing people access to videos or tools (often in a gamified manner) which inform them about critical thinking techniques that can be used when consuming media. These may help people identify their existing biases and the biases of the media they consume, identify language that could indicate disinformation or misinformation, or provide information on how to identify lack of proof and to think critically about sources.

Given that attempting to debunk disinformation campaigns may have the opposite effect than intended, prebunking is likely to be more successful if correctly used.

PRE-INFORMING

Pre-informing is the practice of providing clear information about an event which may or may not happen (such as a global pandemic) as soon as there are warning signs.

The COVID-19 pandemic showed that many populations did not have the tools to absorb the scientific literature being published and filled in their perception using their own biases or the biases of the media where the research was published. This was similar for government publications and reactions to public health measures.

By providing easily digestible fact-sheets explaining key terms, key facts, and key skills in interpreting scientific literature, publics can more easily engage with official and scientific literature, enabling people to identify potential disinformation and misinformation