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True Costs of Misinformation

Introduction

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Under what circumstances do policymakers and civil society define misinformation as a social problem, and how are harms redressed, if at all? Misinformation is a sociotechnical phenomenon with multiple, sometimes contradictory, aims that evolve in situ, where media manipulators leverage the social web for play, panic, and/or politics. Beginning in 2016, the field of disinformation studies sought to address the emergent capacities of social media products that advantage media manipulation campaigns, where technology companies provided low- to no-cost broadcast tools for increasing engagement without much concern for the quality of information. Rather than view misinformation as an anomaly or bug, we see misinformation as a feature of sociotechnical systems, particularly social media, that seek to increase the overall speed and scale of audience engagement. In this Special Section, we ask: Who pays for the harms and damage wrought by misinformation? What are their financial, social, and human costs to society? Whose definitions, measures, and experiences of digital harms matter when coordinating a global response?

Keywords: misinformation, disinformation studies, conspiracy, infodemic, social media, technology policy

Ohio Senator and vice-presidential nominee JD Vance tweeted on Monday, September 9, 2024:

> Months ago, I raised the issue of Haitian illegal immigrants draining social services and generally causing chaos all over Springfield, Ohio. Reports now show that people have had their pets abducted and eaten by people who shouldn't be in this country. Where is our border czar? (Vance, 2024)

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Vance's tweet thrust a racist, xenophobic narrative into the mainstream spotlight that had to that point remained mostly on the far-right fringes of social media, especially on X. Vance's post emboldened online trolls to share dehumanizing memes and disinformation about migrants in Springfield and beyond. The next day during a presidential debate with Vice President Kamala Harris, President Donald Trump repeated the false claim, which confused millions of people watching. His statement led to a series of newsroom fact-checks countering the narrative, but the damage was already unfolding locally.

In the city of Springfield, right-wing social media influencers showed up to gather "evidence" of migrants abusing pets. While they interviewed some colorful and, sometimes, bigoted residents, none could substantiate the rumors. A well-known right-wing provocateur online, Christopher Rufo, offered a $5,000 bounty for proof that migrants in Springfield were eating cats (Rufo, 2024), and yet again no one came forward. The arrival of the far-right influencers was coupled with live streaming from Springfield to thousands of people online, exacerbating the issue by raising the specter of a cover-up and making networked incitement a serious issue for residents of the small city.

According to the governor's office, city employees, school administrators, and others in civil service fielded at least thirty-three bomb threats in the week after the misinformation was posted by Senator JD Vance (Manuel, 2024). Schools, a local college, and government buildings were closed, while bomb-sniffing dogs investigated potential threats. A downtown festival celebrating community diversity was canceled too. Haitian residents reported vandalism to their cars and harassment in public places, contributing to increased fear and anxiety (Neel, 2024).

When a disinformation campaign mobilizes, the scale of hate, harassment, and incitement can compound traumas. The aftermath of disinformation campaigns are largely understudied, and their costs remain unnamed and unremunerated. When misinformation reaches millions of people, what are the financial, social, and human costs to society? What price do businesses, hospitals, civil society groups, municipal governments, and schools pay for managing crises that arise from misleading information online? How can researchers support public officials, and especially the communities targeted by disinformation campaigns, when building capacity for resilience? Can we put a price tag on misinformation, and if so, how, and who is responsible for paying it?

These were the foundational questions that mobilized the editors and contributors of this Special Section and the 150 workshop participants of the "True Costs of Misinformation" online event in March 2022. Ong, Donovan, and other conference organizers brought together over 150 academics, journalists, civil society actors, and private industry leaders to discuss the harms caused by misinformation and in doing so, better inform policies on Internet governance, private sector regulation, and technological innovation. The workshop's aim was to expand the terms of debate in disinformation studies and bring communication and digital politics scholars into conversation with economists, climate change modeling experts, humanitarian and human rights workers, and public health scholars. By bringing together experts in adjacent fields to develop impact assessment models, crisis response frameworks, auditing tools, and accountability guidelines and mechanisms, this event explored novel and creative explanatory models to study the impacts of misinformation and advance a "whole-of-society approach" (Donovan et al., 2021).

Over six years into labeling and debunking "fake news" and the rapid growth of misinformation studies as an interdisciplinary field, researchers and policymakers are still often at odds with each other when it comes to measuring and communicating the social harms of misinformation. Researchers bear burdens of quantification, description, and storytelling to advocate for adequate support that could be extended to vulnerable communities, frontline responders, and the public at large. But across many disciplines, methodological traditions, and political commitments, researchers themselves are in disagreement with the efficacy of specific interventions, the tools for measuring direct or indirect media "effects," and the precise culpability of the political elites and social media platforms at the center of controversies. While private industry has taken initiatives to quantify financial costs of misinformation for their own risk mitigation and organizational forecasts, conference organizers sought out diverse participants to discuss how the field can refine its frameworks for measurement, learn from impact assessment models of other disciplines, and harness the diversity of tools, methods, and traditions at our disposal for a strategic "whole-of-society" approach to mitigating misinformation.

As roughly half of our workshop participants were outside the United States, the question of how exactly disinformation studies can be more globally minded and community driven was also a great concern. Scholars and activists from the Global South were particularly attuned to the vulnerabilities of "mainstream" disinformation studies and its tech-first interventions industry that leans toward co-option and hijacking by state and military power (Lim, 2020; Ong, 2021).

At the same time, the workshop invited critical inquiry into methodology by asking what can qualitative researchers and ethnographers learn from quantitative scholars and risk analysts when attempting to measure impacts, effects, harms, and unintended consequences of mis- and disinformation? What are the opportunities and risks when developing precise metrics, and how do we recognize distortions and power asymmetries in who and what get to be counted (Krause, 2014; Madianou, Ong, Longboan, & Cornelio, 2016)? When understanding misinformation impacts, how can we nuance existing models of media effects that takes into consideration audience agency and accountability in sharing misinformation (Chadwick & Vaccari, 2019; Madrid-Morales et al., 2021; Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2016)?

Counting the Casualties: Methodological and Political Challenges

Building on wins of various "whole-of-society" coalitions that came together to respond to COVID-19 and its accompanying infodemic, the political climate back in early 2022 was ripe for creative brainstorming for initiatives focused on Big Tech accountability. As a scholar of social movements and technology studies, Joan Donovan was specifically concerned with the ways social media companies were socializing the costs of misinformation while privatizing the profits made from unregulated broadcast technologies. Since the 2016 U.S. elections, she had also participated and led various coalitions of journalists, tech designers, civil society leaders, politicians, educators, and researchers to quarantine the viral spread of misinformation. One puzzle these coalitions often faced was measuring and accounting for the market externalities caused by unregulated social media products that produce misinformation-at-scale, thus convening a workshop to problematize and think through the various "costs" of misinformation.

Why study the cost of misinformation-at-scale? We believe compelling research paves the way for empirical arguments for social change. For example, epidemiologists have long studied the ways in which secondhand smoke endangers public health, which has given rise to a whole host of increased costs in other sectors, including new fields for medical professionals, smoking cessation programs, public education, and enforcement of smoke-free spaces. To achieve policy change, researchers had to demonstrate that the cost of doing nothing was more than a preference or a moral hazard but had quantifiable effects in lost hours of productivity, sick time, educational programs, supplementary insurance, and even hard infrastructure costs such as ventilation and alarm systems. Like secondhand smoke, misinformation-at-scale damages the quality of public life.

For Jonathan Corpus Ong, a global media scholar, questions of political economy and ethics have motivated his disinformation research. Precisely identifying who perpetrators are, the industries they come from, and the complicities of so-called respectable creative and media industries to disinformation production was the subject of "Architects of Networked Disinformation" (Ong & Cabañes, 2018). As one of the few ethnographic studies that drew on interviews across the vertical hierarchy of high-level political consultants, PR strategists, influencers, and precariously employed and exploited human workers behind fake accounts in Duterte's Philippines, Ong's research posed a challenge to the mainstream solutions that focused on "fixing the content." Without grounded and contextual knowledge of who exactly are the top-level masterminds behind disinformation campaigns in specific regions, then we risk punching down, naming-and-shaming low-level operators, and catching misinformation only once it has spread. The frame "disinformation-for-hire" presents a challenge to usual binaries of good-and-evil and heroes-and-villains in mainstream research to dwell on moral gray areas and political-commercial complicities that have made online deception a multimillion-dollar global industry (Grohmann & Ong, 2024).

Discussing who pays what price for unchecked misinformation will shed light on who is accountable and what is needed to produce reforms and institutionalize consumer protections. This discussion also seeks to empower civil society leaders with the tools for research and advocacy they need to lead a local response that responds to their specific priorities rather than those imposed by various international "experts" and funders that impose top-down and extractive collaborations (Ong et al., 2024).

Previewing the Special Section

With the mass adoption of social media, participation in online communities has become increasingly important for shaping our political and social institutions, both positively and negatively. While some research focuses on harms such as the loss of trust in politicians, growing news deserts, and the impersonation of social movements by domestic and foreign operatives, no research has focused on the true costs of misinformation (i.e., the market externalities caused by unregulated social media products that produce misinformation-at-scale). Misinformation-at scale occurs when rumors, gossip, or lies attain a large audience through social media engagement. Every misinformation campaign impacts different groups in a variety of ways, where the expense of not responding can compound over time. In this Special Section, we ask, At what cost, and to whom?

All of the articles in this special issue use qualitative methods to analyze misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories to show how these narratives are produced, circulated, and received in different sociopolitical contexts, emphasizing their impact on political behavior, public perception, and democratic processes. With case studies from the United States, India, Philippines, Kenya, Senegal, Asian diasporic communities, and a global survey of misinformation regulations, our authors share common themes including the co-optation of rationality, credibility, or truth-seeking to legitimize false or harmful narratives set against the sociocultural dynamics (e.g., race, class, diaspora, historical memory) that shape how misinformation spreads and is interpreted. All provide a word of caution around the limitations of top-down interventions (like fact-checking, algorithms, or legislation) and express a need for context-sensitive, community-based responses.

Marwick and Furl analyze the concept of "redpills" in extremist communities, which refers to disinformation framed as *undeniable* truths meant to expose the powerful ideologies controlling governments and society. Often rooted in racism, misogyny, and conspiracy, these "redpills" are shared as persuasive tools, especially on platforms like Gab and Discord. While some believe "redpilling" is a moment of awakening, it is typically a gradual process of socialization, reinforced by repeated exposure to disinformation through articles, memes, and, notably, books. Texts like *Mein Kampf* and *The Bell Curve* serve as status symbols and entry points into extremist ideologies. Communities promote "doing the reading" and "doing your own research" as evidence of critical thinking, creating a veneer of rationality around hateful beliefs. This intellectual framing helps members see themselves not as bigots but as truth-seekers resisting a corrupt mainstream. The "redpill" narrative simplifies complex sociopolitical issues into digestible but dangerous beliefs. Recognizing "redpilling" as a process—not just a single moment—highlights the need for long-term, values-based interventions that counter extremist disinformation with credible messaging. Addressing radicalization effectively requires understanding how rationality and online cultures are co-opted to legitimize hate.

Kuo, Reddi, and Li explored how to build a qualitative research design sensitive to multilingual and intergenerational participants across Asian diasporic communities. These researchers found that when discussing politics, interviewees often avoided direct political talk due to conflict, cultural norms, or distrust rooted in past political experiences. Politics was often discussed indirectly through media habits, family dynamics, or coded language. To address this, the team revised the interview guide to emphasize nonjudgement, memory, indirect questions, and emotional care. These adjustments helped uncover nuanced understandings of political engagement, revealing that mis/disinformation and political avoidance are tied to broader structural and historical experiences within diasporic communities. Further, these researchers recommend adopting community-based interventions that move beyond fact-checking or other more technological interventions.

Madrid-Morales, Tully, Mudavadi, Matanji, and Diop investigate how media professionals and social media users in Kenya and Senegal understand and respond to misinformation differently. Media professionals link it to news, politics, and journalistic standards, viewing it as a threat to media integrity and often tied to political motives. In contrast, social media users associate misinformation with everyday life—scams, fake job ads, or health rumors—often shared by trusted contacts on platforms like WhatsApp. Media professionals focus on structural responses (e.g., government, platforms), while social media users

emphasize personal action. This study reveals a disconnect between media professionals' perceptions of audiences and the diverse, self-reported behaviors of social media users. While professionals often see audiences as passive, gullible, or uninformed, users display varying levels of agency, categorized into three groups: engaged, detached, and analogue. These groups reflect different strategies and levels of media literacy, shaped by demographics and social context. The study calls for misinformation interventions to align with users' real behaviors and needs, emphasizing local relevance, broader definitions of misinformation, and the importance of preemptive media literacy initiatives.

Bradshaw, Lim, and Haque contend that the global increase in misinformation legislation is an outcome of four historical contingencies: (1) the mainstreaming of the term "fake news" by political and media elites, (2) the impact of Western dominance in shaping global security narratives and policies, (3) governments' interest in managing and restricting information dissemination, and (4) prominent disclosures about platform regulation and associated harms. Their analysis illustrates the global diffusion of policy responses, influenced by hegemonic powers and authoritarian learning on how to counter oppositional forces. Laws targeting misinformation include imprisonment for individuals spreading fake news, penalties for media and social platforms, content control measures, forced corrections, and new administrative requirements like transparency and licensing mandates. However, framing misinformation solely as a security issue narrows the approach and ignores deeper societal factors like media distrust and political polarization. Moving forward, a more inclusive, context-aware approach is needed, addressing misinformation's unique manifestations across different cultures, histories, and geographies.

Sharma examines the financial costs of disinformation in India, where political professionalization and digital misinformation have developed simultaneously. It highlights how inadequate political finance regulations and rising campaign costs, fueled by "black money," exacerbate the spread of disinformation. Sharma outlines the challenges of quantifying these costs, arguing that understanding financial flows is crucial to analyzing the disinformation industry. It also emphasizes the socioeconomic inequalities linked to disinformation financing, shedding light on overlooked aspects of how money supports the circulation of false narratives, and the broader implications for regulatory reform in an environment where some politicians benefit from using misinformation. In fact, disinformation financing in India often drains state resources, as politicians misuse public funds to reward media manipulators. Sharma concludes by discussing "patronage democracies" and the unequal distribution of financial and social capital, benefiting elite, privileged groups, thus deepening existing socioeconomic and political inequalities.

Curato and Tomacruz examine the complex role of conspiracy theories in deliberative democracy, focusing on the Philippines' 2022 presidential campaign. They argue that conspiracy theories, while harmful to public discourse, also promote norms of free inquiry and critical assessment of evidence. Through a case study of a disinformation campaign centering on "Marcos' gold bars," the researchers illustrate how misinformation played an important role in Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s 2022 election victory. Rumors circulating on social media rebranded the Marcos family's image and promoted the idea that the Marcoses' wealth would be redistributed to Filipinos. Despite being debunked by newsrooms and other institutions, the claim served a major political function that normalized the Marcos family's legitimacy, attracted support for the candidate, and held out the possibility for supporters to imagine prosperity. Like Kuo, Reddi, and Li, Curato and Tomacruz also found that respondents avoided directly discussing politics and preferred to joke to avoid discussions of corruption.

Soul Searching in Misinformation Research

The observations offered in this article cannot be divorced from the context in which they were written: a dramatic upset in U.S. foreign aid that threatens to shrink and weaken efforts to combat disinformation worldwide. Simultaneously, the U.S. government appears determined not just to defund tech accountability advocacy but to pressure foreign governments into abandoning their own efforts (Ionova, 2025). This crisis atmosphere comes as advocates for technology reform in the United States reflect on the field of disinformation studies and its dim prospects for near-term policy change (Barrett, 2025).

It is cold comfort, but this moment marks a possible inflection point for the field (Pasquetto, Lim, & Bradshaw, 2024). Responses to disinformation—and the theories of change that propel them—should reduce their reliance on assumptions that citizens who voted for strongmen were technologically brainwashed, mere "Pavlov's dogs" who have lost their "free will" (Ressa, 2022, para. 5). These framings are not only inaccurate; they are deeply dehumanizing. To reduce voters to manipulated automatons is to deny them agency and rationality, effectively excluding them from the democratic conversation.

This Special Section collects articles at a peak moment of great momentum for tech accountability and tech justice advocacy—one led by researchers and policymakers in the United States. We hope this collection also opens up discussion on the mistakes and oversights of the field of disinformation studies at this peak moment, what needs to be discarded, and what we need to retain moving forward.

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