ASPEN TECH POLICY HUB
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Policy 101: Mis- and Disinformation

What are misinformation and disinformation?

Misinformation is the unintentional sharing of false information. When sharing misinformation, the sharer can believe that what they are sharing is true, or at least not know that what they are sharing is false. Disinformation is the intentional sharing of false information. Unlike misinformation, which can be shared without malice, disinformation is shared with the purpose to mislead – the sharer knows that the information is false and shares it anyway.

Disinformation can lead to misinformation. When one actor puts something out that they know is false (disinformation), they hope others will unknowingly believe it to be true and continue to spread that false information (misinformation).

How did we get here?

Mis- and disinformation have always existed – since humans have had the ability to communicate, we have been able to spread falsehoods, whether intentionally or unintentionally. However, advancements in communications technology, especially through the internet, have caused a dramatic increase in the spread of both mis- and disinformation. As social media has made it easier for individuals to reach mass audiences, it has become correspondingly easier for bad actors to spread disinformation and misinformation at scale. Algorithms for social media platforms also often prioritize posts with high engagement, rewarding sensational content, factual or not. Over time, the forms that mis- and disinformation can take have also expanded from speech and text to manipulated images, videos, and more.

Why does this matter?

The spread of mis- and disinformation has many negative consequences. As noted by the Aspen Commission on Information Disorder, it has helped hate groups organize, allowed governments to incite genocide, and disproportionately harmed racial and ethnic minorities. When harmful mis- and disinformation is spread online, it can lead to conflict and violence in the real world.

What are policymakers doing about mis- and disinformation?

In short, there is currently no comprehensive public policy in the US that addresses mis- and disinformation on the internet. Though federal agencies like the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) have rules to prevent some instances of mis- and disinformation spread through media, radio, and advertising, they do not exercise the same authority over the internet, where misinformation today spreads the fastest.

The Aspen Commission on Information Disorder, comprised of experts from media, industry, academia, and civil society, details 15 recommendations for combatting mis- and disinformation. The Commission recommends that the White House champion a comprehensive federal approach to mis- and disinformation, which would more clearly define specific agencies' roles and responsibilities. The Commission also details several proposals for Congressional legislation targeting platforms, including requiring them to archive high-reach content, disclose their content moderation policies, and disclose information about digital ads and paid content.

Notably, some policymakers warn that policies to combat mis- and disinformation could violate the First Amendment; they argue that the government risks undermining freedom of speech if it takes a more heavy-handed approach to moderating online speech.

What are platforms doing about mis- and disinformation?

Shielded by Section 230 of the Communications and Decency Act (see our Policy 101 here), companies have great discretion over how they manage mis- and disinformation on their platforms. Section 230 protects companies from being held accountable for third-party content on their platforms, allowing them to adjudicate the truthfulness of users' posts as much or as little as they wish.

Companies that choose to tackle mis- and disinformation are faced with two big challenges: identifying misinformation and figuring out what to do with it. To identify false information, many platforms use a combination of automated algorithms and human review. Then, platforms like Facebook and Twitter "tag" certain posts to indicate to users that content might not be factual. Platforms have also iterated, with varying success, on features that "crowdsource fact-checking" by allowing users to annotate posts; warn users not to share links they haven't opened; and apply extra restrictions to content related to elections and public health.

Some platforms, including Twitter, have also adopted policies to remove users who repeatedly share disinformation. Partly in response, new platforms have promised not to remove users on the basis of their posts.

TERMS TO KNOW

Deepfakes are highly sophisticated manipulations of media products, typically developed with AI technologies.

Cheapfakes are manipulations of media products with a low level of sophistication.

Bots are internet software that are programmed to execute repetitive tasks, such as sharing content on social media.

Superspreaders are individuals or accounts that spread a disproportionately high amount of mis- and disinformation.

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The Aspen Tech Policy Hub is a West Coast policy incubator, training a new generation of STEM policy entrepreneurs. Our Policy 101s offer quick and to-the-point overviews of the key tech policy issues of the day. For more information, visit www.aspentechpolicyhub.org.

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