Coordination: A prerequisite for an effective fight against misinformation

By Valerie Belair-Gagnon, Oscar Westlund and Bente Kalsnes

At the beginning of the 2020 U.S. election, Twitter marked false or misleading information. It then changed its strategic orientation by hiding fewer false or misleading posts to contextualize fact-checks, such as by linking to the source of the information. This example confirms how platform companies have become arbiters of truth, while news organizations and fact-checking companies are seeking to regain gatekeeping power from Big Tech and Silicon Valley.

This particular arbitration of "what is truth" shows a stark contrast with what journalists have sought to achieve. Journalists have been described as civic gatekeepers, meaning "civic and moral roles of journalistic institutions, and their enactment of cultural codes that give shape to, and help to protect, a society's normative values." Meanwhile, platform companies have taken the role of gatekeepers of democracy, a role traditionally taken by formal political actors through formal political channels and engaging in opinion power, as Helberger argues. These two forms of gatekeeping shows a detachment between media, tech, and platform companies, the latter having demonstrably been developing policies on the fly. Meanwhile, governments are increasingly trying to regulate and limit platform power and, as Meese argues, they may fail to address the interconnectedness of platforms and news publishers, and ultimately care for public interest.

These power dynamics between fact-checkers, journalists, and platform companies prompt a set of questions in the fight against misinformation. Who are the winners and losers? Who does what for what gain? How can people find truthful information? In other words, what does the digital labor of fighting against misinformation tell us about the technologically driven practices and ways in which actors are seeking to gain legitimacy with their audiences? And "what are the limits of what fact-checking can accomplish without greater support from platform companies for the researchers, journalists, and fact-checkers seeking to understand and limit the spread of harmful misinformation?"

As we proposed in our project, Source Criticism and Mediated Disinformation (SCAM), advancements in image, video, and audio manipulation technology are being used both to misinform and manipulate, as well as to determine the trustworthiness of sources and content. Diverse emerging digital technologies can be used by actors with intentions to manipulate, but also by journalists, fact-checkers, technologists, and other stakeholders working to detect and counter information manipulation. Annany reports on evolving

platform-press collaborations in the U.S. between Facebook and major news and fact-checking organizations. Graves and Anderson studied the developments of other collaborations around structured journalism and fact-checking widgets. Ultimately, research suggests that while publishers and platform companies are competitors for attention, engagement, and revenues, there is a form of codependence between them when it comes to combating misinformation. This combat is at the core of the fight against misinformation, which extends beyond human actors and includes also the digital technologies they use, as well as more or less active audiences potentially contributing to networked forms of fact-checking.

Thus emerge tensions and how they may work towards "reconciling" external collaborations for reducing misinformation with business logic: To reduce misinformation, key institutions need to recognize that they are a part of a larger informational system, and work in concert with other institutions towards shared goals by integration of their diverse specialized knowledge and specialized technological affordances. But any such coordination may run counter to the incentives of major companies and upstarts, and is often difficult across industries or sectors.

Journalists, fact-checkers, and platform companies each have their own ways of socially and technologically constructing truth. Fact-checkers, for example, pride themselves on being a transparent business, showing what steps they have taken to come to their conclusions. Journalists, on the other hand may have to uphold a set of traditional journalistic values and epistemological presumptions. It is worth noting, though, that these values, norms, and practices may vary across cultures, as the World of Journalism Study has again and again demonstrated.

In our grant-funded research, SCAM, we are asking a series of questions which may enlighten us better on visible and less visible technological tools and systems deployed to fight misinformation, from fact-checkers and journalists to tech companies. The problem in the fight against misinformation may lie in divergent epistemological departure and a lack of coordination.

Organizations have their own interests and missions that depend on time, resources, and capability, which affects the choices that they make. In our interviews, a fact-checker emphasized how effective fact-checking relied on local understandings. A media organization may decide to develop their database only in a particular locale as to not uphold privacy laws in other locales. Journalists also shared the sentiment that they have to fight for those who agree with them, an idea supported by research, and seem to long the idea that they could convince those who have different opinions.

These fragmented practices that are based on missions, interests, and capability, underlie a larger issue: How can truth gain legitimacy if the institutions are fragmented and there is limited coordination among actors (noting that right-wing extremists are now moving to like-minded networking platforms such as Parler)? One thing is certain: Tech solutionism is not the ultimate way out to fix or solve the problem; rather it may exacerbate the issue. The larger institutional questions and power dynamics, which sociotechnical systems can help unpack, are ones that tech companies as arbiters of democracy and journalism and fact-checkers as civic gatekeepers will have to reckon with in concert with each other.

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