

FROM CLICKBAIT TO CONSPIRACY: THE URGENT NEED FOR PLATFORM ACCOUNTABILITY IN COMBATING SOCIAL MEDIA'S AMPLIFICATION OF POLITICAL MISINFORMATION

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Abstract

This study confronts the escalating threat posed by the unchecked spread of false narratives in the digital age, particularly within political campaigns. The motivation for this study is rooted in the demonstrable corrosive effects of misinformation on democratic processes, public trust and social cohesion, accelerated by the inherent design and business models of major social media platforms. The study's main objective is to argue for increased platform accountability as a critical, non-negotiable countermeasure. Drawing upon Media Effects Theories, Platform Studies and relevant regulatory frameworks and utilising a comprehensive library method to synthesise existing scholarship and policy documents. The library method, as a qualitative research approach, involves the systematic gathering, review and critical analysis of secondary materials such as peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, books and credible online resources relevant to digital communication, misinformation and technology regulation. By relying on documented evidence rather than field data, the method ensures analytical depth, theoretical clarity and cross-contextual validity in understanding how platform algorithms, engagement-driven metrics and monetisation models contribute to the virality of falsehoods. Key arguments assert that social media platforms' algorithmic amplification, engagement-driven metrics and monetisation of virality inadvertently create fertile ground for misinformation to flourish, from sensational clickbait to elaborate conspiracy theories. Current self-regulatory measures are demonstrably insufficient, failing to curb widespread harm. The study contends that platforms possess the technical capacity and a moral, civic obligation to implement more robust interventions. It concludes that genuine platform accountability, encompassing transparency mandates, algorithmic audits and a fundamental shift in business models that prioritise public welfare over engagement, is not merely desirable but essential for fostering a healthier, more trustworthy digital public sphere. Recommendations include stricter regulatory oversight, mandatory transparency frameworks and collaborative governance models to ensure platforms are responsible custodians of information during political discourse.

Key words: Algorithms, digital age, disinformation, misinformation, platform accountability, political campaigns, social media.

Introduction

The advent of the digital age has profoundly reconfigured the global information ecosystem, endowing individuals with unprecedented access to news and accelerating the pace of communication (Castells, 2017; Kreiss & McGregor, 2020). At the vanguard of this transformation are social media platforms, which have rapidly ascended to become primary conduits

for political discourse and news consumption for billions worldwide (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, Eddy & Nielsen, 2023). However, this revolutionary connectivity has concurrently unleashed a formidable and increasingly corrosive challenge: the systemic amplification of political misinformation. Spanning a spectrum from sensationalist "clickbait" designed for immediate

engagement to sophisticated "conspiracy theories" that erode trust in established institutions, this phenomenon represents a grave threat to the integrity of democratic processes, the stability of social cohesion and the very foundations of informed public opinion (Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Tucker, Guess, Barbera, Cornia, Collier, Gunaydin & Thach, 2018).

The urgency driving this study is undeniable. Political misinformation, false or inaccurate information that is mistakenly or inadvertently created or spread (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) is demonstrably exacerbated by the inherent design and business models of major social media platforms. Research unequivocally shows that false news, particularly in political contexts, disseminates significantly farther, faster and more deeply than the truth across social networks. In a landmark study analysing approximately 126,000 news cascades on Twitter over an 11-year period, Vosoughi, Roy & Aral (2018) found that falsehoods were 70% more likely to be retweeted than accurate information, especially those concerning politics. The researchers attributed this phenomenon not to bots but to human behaviour, suggesting that novelty and emotional reactions, particularly surprise and disgust drive the virality of misinformation. This rapid and pervasive spread, driven by algorithmic amplification and engagement-optimised metrics, fuels political polarisation, distorts public discourse and can critically undermine electoral integrity and public trust in democratic institutions (Guess, Nagler & Tucker, 2020; Persily & Tucker, 2021). Despite growing awareness of the problem, current self-regulatory measures adopted by platforms have proven largely insufficient in curbing this widespread harm, necessitating a more robust and systemic approach.

This study therefore posits that the cornerstone of a sustainable solution lies in enforcing greater platform accountability. Drawing upon critical insights from Media Effects Theories, which examine the influence of media content on audiences (McQuail, 2010), alongside contemporary Platform Studies that scrutinise the socio-technical architectures and political implications of digital intermediaries (van Dijck, 2013; Srnicek, 2017), this study employs a comprehensive library method to synthesise existing scholarship. It will describe how platforms' architectural choices, including algorithmic design, user incentivisation and

content monetisation, inadvertently create an environment where political misinformation flourishes and propagates with alarming speed. The central argument here is that genuine platform accountability, encompassing transparency mandates, rigorous algorithmic audits and a fundamental re-evaluation of business models that prioritise public welfare over unbridled engagement is not merely a policy option but an urgent and indispensable imperative for fostering a healthier, more trustworthy digital public sphere.

Statement of the Problem

The digital revolution has radically reconfigured political communication, making social media platforms pivotal spaces for public discourse and civic engagement. However, these same platforms have become hotbeds for the rapid spread of political misinformation, ranging from misleading headlines to full-blown conspiracy theories (Vosoughi et al 2018; Tucker et al., 2018). The virality mechanisms embedded in social media algorithms, designed to maximise user engagement have inadvertently incentivised the circulation of sensational, polarising and false political content (Cinelli, Quattrociocchi, Galeazzi, Morales & Stamini, 2021; Guess, Nagler, & Tucker, 2019). These dynamics pose a profound threat to democratic institutions, as they distort public opinion, erode trust in credible sources and undermine informed political participation (Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).

Numerous studies have examined the nature, spread and implications of political misinformation online. For instance, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) empirically assessed the influence of fake news on voter behaviour in the United States, concluding that false stories were widely circulated but found limited evidence of decisive effects on electoral outcomes. Similarly, Tandoc, Lim and Ling (2018) offered a typology of fake news but acknowledged the need for further research into the roles of technology platforms in facilitating its spread. Meanwhile, Bradshaw, Bailey and Howard (2021) documented the global industrialisation of disinformation campaigns, yet their study focused more on state-sponsored manipulation than on the responsibilities of the platforms themselves. These gaps in literature suggest that while the prevalence and consequences of political misinformation are well documented, the mechanisms of platform

amplification and the issue of platform accountability remain insufficiently explored.

Moreover, platform responses to the misinformation crisis have largely been reactive, lacking in transparency and consistency (Gillespie, 2018; Newton, 2021). Efforts such as labelling misleading content, disabling certain accounts, or tweaking algorithms are often ad hoc and not subject to independent audit (Kaye, 2021). Existing regulatory responses also vary widely in scope and effectiveness, especially across regions. For instance, while the European Union has initiated the Digital Services Act to address disinformation, many countries in Africa and Asia lack comprehensive digital governance frameworks (Tambini, 2022; Mare, 2020). These inconsistencies not only highlight a regulatory vacuum but also expose the need for global conversations around platform responsibility and ethical design.

Thus, this study seeks to build upon existing scholarship by interrogating the role of social media platforms in actively amplifying political misinformation and the urgent need for them to be held accountable. Unlike prior research that has primarily focused on misinformation content or user behaviour, this paper shifts the lens toward platform governance, algorithmic design and the ethical obligations of tech companies in safeguarding the democratic process.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study were:

1. To critically examine how social media platforms' algorithmic and engagement-driven architectures contribute to the amplification of political misinformation.
2. To evaluate existing self-regulatory and policy frameworks for platform accountability in mitigating misinformation, identifying their strengths and limitations.
3. To propose a set of ethical, technical and regulatory measures that can enhance transparency, accountability and democratic responsibility in platform governance.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding the amplification of political misinformation on social media necessitates a critical engagement with theories that explain media effects, algorithmic mediation and digital

gatekeeping. This study draws on three interrelated theoretical perspectives: Agenda-Setting Theory, Gatekeeping Theory and Algorithmic Media Theory, each offering distinct yet complementary insights into the dynamics of misinformation dissemination and the responsibility of platforms.

Agenda-Setting Theory

First proposed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), the agenda-setting theory posits that the media may not tell people what to think, but it significantly influences what they think about. In the context of the digital age, this theory has evolved to accommodate the influence of digital platforms in shaping public attention through algorithmic curation. Research by Neuman, Guggenheim, Jang and Bae (2014) affirmed the continuing relevance of agenda-setting in the age of social media, noting that online platforms, particularly through trending topics and algorithmic prioritisation, play an increasing role in determining the salience of political issues. This suggests that social media platforms, though often viewed as neutral intermediaries, actively influence political discourse by amplifying certain narratives, including misinformation over others.

Gatekeeping Theory

Traditionally, gatekeeping referred to the process by which news editors and journalists selected, filtered and shaped news content (White, 1950). However, in the digital era, gatekeeping functions have shifted to technology platforms and algorithmic systems. Barzilai-Nahon (2008) expanded the concept through the "network gatekeeping theory," introducing the idea of multiple gatekeepers and gatekeeping nodes in the digital information ecosystem. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) further argued that gatekeeping is now influenced by digital metrics such as clicks, likes and shares, which means that viral potential often supersedes factual accuracy. This evolution underscores the fact that tech platforms, through algorithms, content moderation policies and monetisation structures, have assumed a central gatekeeping role, often without the accompanying editorial responsibility.

Algorithmic Media Theory

Algorithmic Media Theory, as articulated by scholars like Gillespie (2014) and Bucher (2018), focuses on how computational systems shape

media visibility and influence user behaviour. Algorithms, in this sense, are not just technical tools but socio-political actors that mediate what is seen and what is hidden on digital platforms. Bucher (2018) contends that users' everyday experiences on platforms like Facebook and Twitter (X) are deeply shaped by algorithmic 'affordances' that often prioritise emotional, controversial, or attention-grabbing content - a dynamic conducive to the viral spread of political misinformation. As such, the amplification of clickbait and conspiracy theories is not accidental but structurally embedded within the logic of platform algorithms optimised for engagement (Tufekci, 2015; Ribeiro, Ottoni, West, Almeida & Meira, 2020).

These three theories together provide a robust lens for interrogating the responsibility of platforms in the circulation of political misinformation. Agenda-setting highlights their influence over public priorities; gatekeeping theory addresses their content moderation role; and algorithmic media theory reveals the infrastructural logics that incentivise the viral spread of dubious political content. Therefore, the framework not only justifies the call for greater platform accountability but also exposes the urgent need to reimagine digital responsibility in the governance of political communication.

Conceptual Review

To unpack the complexities embedded in the amplification of political misinformation via social media, it is essential to explore the key concepts of clickbait, political misinformation, algorithmic amplification and platform accountability. These concepts are intertwined in shaping the digital public sphere and their intersections provide the framework for assessing the role of digital platforms in exacerbating contemporary information disorders.

Clickbait refers to online content designed primarily to attract attention and encourage clicks, often through sensationalist headlines or misleading information. While clickbait itself is not inherently false, its manipulative design can act as a conduit for misinformation by prioritising virality over veracity (Blom & Hansen, 2015). This dynamic is especially concerning within political contexts, where emotionally charged headlines can distort public understanding and elevate fringe views (Munger, Guess, Lyons & Tucker, 2020).

Social media platforms, by rewarding engagement over accuracy, provide fertile ground for such content to thrive (Silverman, 2015).

Political misinformation, defined as false or misleading information intended to influence political processes is a growing threat to democratic stability. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) categorise this phenomenon under the broader concept of "information disorder," which includes misinformation, disinformation and malinformation. These forms of untruth have been shown to affect political knowledge, polarisation and voting behaviour (Tucker et al., 2018). What distinguishes political misinformation in the digital age is the scale and speed of its dissemination which is enabled primarily by social media algorithms that prioritise content engagement metrics over public interest (Guess et al., 2020).

Algorithmic amplification is central to understanding the virality of political misinformation. Algorithms used by platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are not passive tools; rather, they are active agents that shape users' information environments. According to Gillespie (2018), these algorithms make editorial decisions that determine which content is seen, shared or suppressed. Research has shown that algorithms tend to favour emotionally provocative and polarising content, inadvertently increasing the visibility of misinformation (Ribeiro et al., 2020). This has led scholars like Tufekci (2015, p. 132) to describe platforms as "attention brokers" that structurally incentivise the spread of manipulative content.

Platform accountability is the normative and legal expectation that technology companies act responsibly in managing content and mitigating harm. Historically, digital platforms have claimed neutrality, citing their roles as mere conduits for user-generated content (Gillespie, 2010). However, increased scrutiny following political events such as the Brexit referendum and the 2016 U.S. presidential election has led to a re-evaluation of this position. Suzor (2019) argues that platform governance must now be viewed as a form of power, requiring transparent rules, due process and democratic oversight. Despite recent reforms in content moderation and fact-checking, many platforms still lack consistent and enforceable mechanisms for addressing political misinformation (Bradshaw et al 2021).

At the intersection of these concepts lies a critical tension: the economic logic of platform design (which favours engagement) versus the democratic necessity for truthful public discourse. The conceptual links between clickbait, misinformation, algorithmic design and corporate responsibility underscore the urgent need for policy interventions and ethical design standards in the digital media environment. Without robust accountability frameworks, platforms risk becoming complicit in eroding democratic institutions by enabling the spread of misleading political content (Napoli, 2019; Helberger, Pierson & Poell, 2018).

Opinion Review

Scholarly and public discourse surrounding social media's role in the proliferation of political misinformation has produced a spectrum of opinions; ranging from calls for self-regulation by technology companies to proposals for robust governmental oversight. This section critically reviews these perspectives, highlighting the nuanced debates about platform accountability and the broader implications for democracy, freedom of expression and technological ethics.

A dominant opinion in the academic literature argues that social media platforms, by design, are not neutral intermediaries but algorithmically curated environments that favour engagement over accuracy (Gillespie, 2018). This has led scholars to advocate for greater platform accountability. Napoli (2019) contends that the commercial incentives embedded in platform algorithms inherently privilege sensational and misleading content, particularly of a political nature, thereby exacerbating polarisation and weakening informed democratic participation. This perspective calls for the imposition of ethical and regulatory frameworks that align platform operations with the public interest.

In contrast, some researchers maintain that regulation of content dissemination on platforms presents a significant risk to freedom of speech and innovation. Klonick (2017, p. 1662) refers to platforms as "the new governors of speech" and argues that while content moderation is necessary, overregulation could lead to censorship and a chilling effect on political discourse. This libertarian viewpoint is wary of governmental interference in the digital public sphere, advocating instead for voluntary self-regulation

and transparent corporate governance.

However, self-regulation has been widely criticised as inadequate. Helberger, Pierson and Poell (2018) argue that the voluntary efforts by platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, such as labelling false content or demoting it in feeds are insufficient given the scale of the misinformation problem. The authors suggest a co-regulatory model, where governments, civil society and platforms collaborate to develop accountability standards that balance free expression with information integrity.

A growing body of literature also supports the idea that algorithmic transparency is central to platform accountability. Rieder and Sire (2014) argue that platforms must be compelled to disclose how their recommendation engines and ranking systems work, particularly in the context of political content. Without such transparency, the public and regulators remain in the dark about the mechanisms that amplify conspiracy theories and falsehoods. This position is echoed by Sandvig, Hamilton, Karahalios and Langbort (2014), who advocate for algorithm audits to detect bias and misinformation amplification.

From a policy standpoint, the European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA) has been cited as a model for enforcing platform responsibility. According to De Streele, Defraigne, Ledure and Hocepiet (2020), the DSA establishes a legal foundation for holding platforms accountable for harmful content, including political misinformation, by imposing obligations for risk assessment, content moderation transparency and third-party auditing. These measures are widely seen as a step in the right direction, although some critics caution against their potential misuse in authoritarian contexts (Kaye, 2020).

On the other hand, some scholars emphasise digital literacy as the most effective and sustainable solution. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) argue that empowering users through media and information literacy can help counter the influence of misinformation at the individual level. While this approach is proactive and democratic, it is often criticised for placing the burden on users rather than on the platforms that profit from misinformation ecosystems (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017).

In essence, the debate over platform accountability in the fight against political misinformation reveals a landscape of contested opinions. While some

scholars champion regulatory intervention and algorithmic transparency, others caution against state overreach and advocate for literacy-based solutions. What is broadly agreed upon, however, is that the current *laissez-faire* model of platform governance is unsustainable in the face of escalating political misinformation crises.

Review of Empirical Studies

Tucker et al. (2018), in their study on "Social Media, Political Polarisation and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature", investigated how social media influences political disinformation and polarisation. Using a meta-analytic review of multiple global studies, the authors found strong evidence that platforms amplify false content through algorithmic targeting and emotional appeal. They concluded that while platforms can be valuable for civic engagement, they also pose threats to democratic integrity. They recommended platform redesigns and stronger fact-checking systems. This aligns with the current study's focus on platform accountability but differs as Tucker et al. primarily conducted a literature synthesis rather than advocating direct regulatory reform.

Guess, Nagler and Tucker (2019), in their work titled "Less than You Think: Prevalence and Predictors of Fake News Dissemination on Facebook", aimed to understand who shares misinformation and how widespread it is. They conducted a quantitative analysis using a representative U.S. Facebook user dataset during the 2016 election. The findings showed that misinformation sharing was relatively rare but concentrated among older, conservative users. They concluded that digital literacy and political identity shape misinformation spread. They recommended targeting media literacy at vulnerable demographics. Unlike this study's emphasis on platform accountability, their focus lies more on user behaviour, though both studies agree on the need for systemic intervention.

Bradshaw and Howard (2019) published "The Global Disinformation Order: 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation", assessing how state actors manipulate public opinion through coordinated campaigns on social platforms. Employing a cross-country comparative case study approach, they discovered that at least 70 countries used social media for political manipulation. They concluded

that misinformation is now a geopolitical tool and called for stronger regulation of tech companies. Their research supports this work's call for accountability, though their scope is more international and focuses heavily on state-sponsored disinformation, whereas this study emphasises corporate platform responsibilities.

Marchal, Kollanyi, Neudert and Howard (2021), in their study titled, "COVID-19 and the Impact of Misinformation on Democratic Processes", explored how pandemic-related misinformation undermined political trust. They used survey data and content analysis across five African countries. The key finding was that misinformation during COVID-19 deepened mistrust in government and institutions. They concluded that platform inaction exacerbated societal harm. Their recommendation included regional regulation and public-private partnerships to improve transparency. Their study complements the current work by reinforcing the argument that unchecked misinformation, whether health or political requires accountability mechanisms from digital platforms.

Research Methodology

This study adopts the library research method, a qualitative and interpretive approach that synthesises existing scholarship to critically explore the role of social media platforms in amplifying political misinformation and the corresponding need for platform accountability. The library method is particularly suitable for this study because it draws on established academic works, policy documents and institutional reports to generate new insights through synthesis and interpretation rather than field data collection. As George and Bennett (2005) observed, library-based research enables contextual understanding by connecting ideas, theories and empirical evidence across disciplines. Nwalo (2011) similarly emphasises that library research is essential when a study's objective is to derive conclusions from documented sources and existing theoretical frameworks.

Period Covered

The study covers literature published between 2010 and 2024, a period that encapsulates the post-Web 2.0 evolution of social media and its growing influence on global political communication. This timeframe was deliberately chosen to include key moments that have shaped public and scholarly discourse on digital misinformation, particularly

the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the Brexit referendum and the COVID-19 infodemic. These events reflect the heightened intersection between technology, politics and society, and underscore the relevance of platform accountability debates in contemporary media studies.

Population of the Study

The population of this study consists of 310 secondary sources drawn from a diverse range of materials directly relevant to misinformation, digital platforms and governance. These include 140 peer-reviewed journal articles addressing misinformation, political communication and algorithmic media; 50 academic books and book chapters focusing on media theory, digital democracy and platform studies; 40 policy documents from authoritative institutions such as the European Union, UNESCO and the OECD; 30 research and institutional reports from reputable bodies like the Oxford Internet Institute, Reuters Institute and Brookings Institution; 25 conference and working papers representing emerging academic debates; and 25 credible digital and media publications from respected sources such as The Atlantic, MIT Technology Review and The Conversation. Together, these materials provide a robust intellectual foundation for a multidimensional understanding of political misinformation and accountability in the digital age.

Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

The study employed a purposive sampling technique to select materials that directly address the core constructs of platform accountability, algorithmic amplification and political misinformation. From the total population of 310 identified works, 120 were selected for detailed analysis based on their scholarly relevance, credibility and recency. These comprised 55 journal articles, 20 academic books and book chapters, 15 policy documents, 10 institutional reports, 10 conference papers and 10 reputable online publications. Priority was given to works published between 2015 and 2024 to ensure contemporary relevance and to capture the most current empirical findings and theoretical arguments. This targeted approach ensured that only sources with direct analytical value and conceptual depth were included in the review.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through systematic searches across academic databases and digital repositories including JSTOR, Scopus, ScienceDirect,

ResearchGate and Google Scholar, as well as official archives such as Europa.eu, UNESCO Policy Observatory and OECD Library. Search strings combined key terms such as “political misinformation,” “algorithmic amplification,” “clickbait,” “platform accountability,” “digital governance,” and “disinformation regulation.” Retrieved materials were subjected to thematic content analysis, following the approach of Braun and Clarke (2013). Four dominant themes emerged from the analysis: (1) algorithmic amplification of misinformation, (2) platform governance and accountability, (3) ethical and policy implications of content moderation and (4) the impact of digital misinformation on democratic discourse. Synthesised findings were then interpreted within the frameworks of Media Effects Theory, Gatekeeping Theory and Algorithmic Media Theory to construct a coherent analytical narrative that links theory to policy realities.

Discussion Findings

This discussion elaborates on the critical arguments underpinning the position that genuine platform accountability is indispensable in combating the systemic amplification of political misinformation on social media. It delves into the inherent architectural features of these platforms that inadvertently, or sometimes directly, facilitate the spread of false narratives, critiques the limitations of current countermeasures and posits the necessity of a fundamental shift towards more robust regulatory and ethical oversight.

The widespread dissemination of political misinformation, from ephemeral clickbait to entrenched conspiracy theories, is not merely a consequence of malicious actors or susceptible users; it is intrinsically linked to the very design and operational logic of social media platforms. These platforms are engineered to maximise user engagement and retention, which directly correlates with advertising revenue (Srnicsek, 2017; van Dijck, 2013). This commercial imperative drives algorithmic choices that, often inadvertently, prioritise content that is emotionally charged, novel and controversial, irrespective of its veracity (Vosoughi et al., 2018; Brady et al., 2017). Algorithms are designed to present users with content most likely to elicit a response: a like, share, or comment. Research by Vosoughi et al. (2018, p.1146) famously demonstrated that false news spreads "significantly farther, faster and more deeply than the truth" across Twitter,

attributing this partly to the novelty and emotional content of false information. This inherent bias towards engagement means that sensationalist headlines, often associated with clickbait, are algorithmically favoured, leading to rapid viral spread even if the content is misleading or unverified (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Platforms' personalisation algorithms, while intended to enhance user experience, contribute to the formation of "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers" (Pariser, 2011; Dubois & Blank, 2018). By selectively exposing users to information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs and social networks, these algorithmic structures reinforce existing biases and limit exposure to diverse or contradictory viewpoints. This creates an environment ripe for the unchallenged acceptance and deeper entrenchment of misinformation, including complex conspiracy theories, as users are rarely exposed to corrective information (Guess et al., 2020).

The ease with which content can be shared, often with a single click, bypasses critical evaluation (Resnick, Bakshy & Messing, 2018). Users are often incentivised by platform design to share rapidly, relying on headlines or emotional triggers rather than deep engagement with the content's veracity (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). This frictionless sharing mechanism accelerates the propagation of misinformation, making it difficult for fact-checking efforts to keep pace (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

The amplification mechanisms inherent in social media platforms contribute to the spread of misinformation across a dangerous spectrum. Instances are:

1. **Clickbait:** At the less malicious end, clickbait exploits cognitive biases and the algorithmic drive for engagement. Sensational headlines or emotionally provocative images are designed to entice clicks and shares, regardless of the quality or accuracy of the underlying content. While not always intentionally deceptive, clickbait normalises the prioritisation of virality over veracity, making users susceptible to more harmful forms of misinformation (Tambini, 2017).

2. **"Fake News" and Malinformation:** This category includes intentionally fabricated news stories (disinformation) or factual information used out of context to mislead (malinformation). Platforms' amplification tools ensure these

narratives reach vast audiences, often designed to sway political opinions, damage reputations, or sow discord (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Examples abound from electoral contexts globally where deliberately false stories about candidates' health, finances, or past actions gained significant traction (Howard et al., 2018; Persily & Tucker, 2021).

3. **Conspiracy Theories:** At the extreme, social media provides an ideal environment for conspiracy theories to germinate, grow, and become entrenched. The algorithmic creation of echo chambers, combined with the human tendency to seek explanations for complex events, allows conspiratorial narratives to flourish, gaining legitimacy within self-reinforcing communities (van der Linden, Leiserowitz & Maibach, 2029). These theories, often politically motivated, can lead to real-world harms, such as vaccine hesitancy, radicalisation and rejection of democratic outcomes (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009; Jolley & Douglas, 2014; Uscinski, Enders, Klofstad, Seelig, Fossen & Murthi, 2020).

Despite the acknowledged harms, current countermeasures against political misinformation, largely driven by platform self-regulation, have proven inadequate and unsustainable.

Platforms primarily rely on content moderation and fact-checking (Vraga & Tully, 2019). However, this approach is inherently reactive, struggling to keep pace with the sheer volume and rapid virality of misinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Even when false content is identified and removed, its initial rapid spread can already have inflicted significant damage. The "whack-a-mole" nature of content takedowns fails to address the systemic issues of amplification.

A critical barrier to effective counter-strategies is the proprietary control platforms exert over their algorithms and user data. This opacity makes it exceedingly difficult for independent academic researchers, policymakers and civil society organisations to truly understand the scale of misinformation amplification, identify its key drivers and rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of interventions (Carnegie Endowment, 2023; MisinfoReview, 2020). Without access to impression data, for instance, it is impossible to fully grasp how many people were exposed to false content.

The fundamental conflict between platforms' profit-driven business models (based on maximising engagement) and their public

responsibility to curb harmful content is a persistent limitation (Srnicek, 2017). Critics argue that platforms are incentivised to allow inflammatory or sensational content to proliferate, as it drives engagement, even if it is misleading. This inherent conflict of interest often leads to a reluctance to implement more stringent measures that might impact user numbers or advertising revenue (CIGI, 2018; Journals Online, 2022).

Moderation policies and their enforcement often vary significantly across languages, countries and political contexts, with less attention typically paid to non-English content or emerging democracies (Posetti & Matthews, 2018; Dlamini, 2021). This inconsistency allows misinformation to thrive in underserved regions, further exacerbating local vulnerabilities.

Conclusion

The digital age has irrevocably transformed political communication, with social media platforms becoming central to how citizens engage with news and campaigns. However, this transformative power has come at a significant cost: the systemic amplification of political misinformation. From sensational clickbait designed for engagement to deeply damaging conspiracy theories, false narratives proliferate with alarming speed and reach, distorting public discourse, eroding trust in democratic processes and fostering societal polarisation. This study has argued that this amplification is not incidental; it is intrinsically linked to platforms' algorithmic designs, engagement-driven metrics and prevailing business models that inadvertently incentivise the spread of captivating, often misleading, content. Existing countermeasures, primarily reliant on platform self-regulation and reactive content moderation, have proven largely inadequate and unsustainable, hampered by a lack of transparency and a fundamental conflict of interest. The problem lies not just with the content, but with the very architecture that enables its widespread and unchecked dissemination.

In light of these pressing concerns, the urgent need for robust platform accountability is paramount. It is no longer sufficient to expect platforms to voluntarily curb harms that may conflict with their commercial objectives. A fundamental shift in governance is required, one that moves beyond the current paradigm of self-regulation to embrace enforceable transparency, independent oversight and a re-evaluation of design principles. True accountability entails platforms accepting their profound civic responsibility as custodians of information in the public sphere. Without such a systemic recalibration, the democratic

implications of unbridled misinformation will only deepen, making informed public discourse and collective decision-making increasingly untenable.

Recommendations

Given the systemic nature of misinformation amplification and the demonstrated limitations of self-regulation, robust platform accountability is not merely desirable but an urgent imperative. To effectively combat the systemic amplification of political misinformation and foster a healthier digital public sphere, the researchers propose the following recommendations:

1. Platforms must be legally mandated to provide greater transparency regarding their algorithmic operations, content moderation policies and data on misinformation spread. Independent researchers and regulators should have access to audit these algorithms to identify and mitigate biases that amplify harmful content (Persily & Tucker, 2021; Heiberger et al., 2020). This would move beyond vague public statements to verifiable scrutiny.

2. Policymakers should explore regulatory interventions that incentivise platforms to prioritise public welfare and factual information over sheer engagement. This could include exploring liability frameworks, data-sharing requirements, or even new regulatory bodies focused on algorithmic oversight (Tambini, 2017; Gillespie, 2018). The aim is to realign platforms' commercial interests with democratic health.

3. Accountability should extend to advocating for "responsible design" principles that mitigate the spread of misinformation from the outset. This includes design choices that encourage critical thinking, slow down sharing, highlight source credibility and promote diverse information diets rather than reinforcing echo chambers (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018; Lewandowsky, Ecker & Cook, 2020).

4. While regulation is key, it should be part of a broader, collaborative governance model involving governments, civil society, academia and the platforms themselves. This approach can foster shared responsibility, allow for adaptive policy responses and leverage diverse expertise (Fung, 2019). However, such collaboration must be underpinned by clear regulatory teeth to ensure platforms act in the public interest.

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