In February 2024, the European Union’s ‘Digital Services Act’ (DSA) will come into effect. The DSA will enforce a standard of transparency on very large social media platforms, obliging them to lay out how their sophisticated, proprietary content recommendation algorithms work. The act is in response to years of algorithmically fuelled disinformation that has undermined public trust and led to real-world harms (Jolley & Paterson, 2020; Wadde & Singerman, 2021). Algorithms and the spread of disinformation are inexorably linked. Algorithmic recommender systems that suggest new content to users may serve as a vector between disinformation producers and social media users, potentially delivering false and harmful content. Understanding these systems, their effects, and public perceptions of algorithms is vital to forming legislation that responds to such threats.

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF DISINFORMATION

My research uses corpus linguistic approaches to study the replication and reception of online disinformation on social media. I focus on how, linguistically, people share false content online and how ideas on the internet spread from their inception until they cease to exist. This involves exploring metacommentary around disinformation, or more simply looking at how people talk about disinformation itself.

Understanding how the public talk about important topics is a fundamental to social media and the spread of disinformation online. While a lack of explicit mention does not imply a complete lack of knowledge, there seems to be an awareness gap. This data offers a snapshot of discussions, and given the extensive policy responses to disinformation, it is vital to learn from these findings.

When the public does discuss disinformation, they are keenly aware of its dangers. Online discussions specifically highlight the threat to democracy caused by disinformation, how it infringes on human rights, and its disproportionate impact on issues such as reproductive healthcare. Throughout, disinformation is framed as an enemy, something we should fight and combat. There is, however, a paradox here. Research has shown that simply discussing disinformation and its negative effects can affect key metrics such as trust and cynicism (Jones-Jang et al., 2020; Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). Therefore, when addressing disinformation, we need to be aware that overexposure to the topic can do more harm than good.

INFORMING POLICY RESPONSES

The public is aware of disinformation’s harmful potential to threaten civil liberties and impact our institutions but they are not necessarily familiar with the nuances of how disinformation spreads through technologies such as algorithms. Responses to disinformation should prioritise the human aspect, and the technical and social aspects of disinformation should not be seen as separate but rather as interconnected elements. Examining people’s real-world concerns in natural settings helps us grasp what troubles them and how changes in our online information environments can tackle the genuine worries related to the dissemination of disinformation.

Further, it is crucial to ground policy responses to security threats in real-world situations for an effective approach. Policies that address the public’s genuine concerns are more likely to garner public support and foster positive change, helping to reduce the impact of disinformation. This includes addressing health threats such as disinformation that rejects conventional medicine and responding to information operations that use disinformation as a medium to undermine democracy. The individuals most at risk from disinformation are the public themselves, and it is their concerns that should guide our response to disinformation.

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