Think Pieces

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Beyond Digital Platforms: Unpacking Disinformation Through a Feminist Commodity Chain Approach

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Contents

Introduction

While disinformation is by no means a phenomenon of the internet age, its current form and shape are part of a new and rapidly evolving information and communications landscape, supercharged by the growth of innovative technologies that enable the dissemination of unparalleled volumes of content at unprecedented speeds (United Nations, 2022). Every crisis that has engulfed us in the last few years—be it the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war, the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Palestine, or the climate crisis—has been a crisis of information—of false narratives, conspiracy theories, hate, and lies (United Nations, n.d.) The Global Disinformation Index has highlighted that at least $235 million in revenue is generated annually from ads running on extremist and disinformation websites, fueled in part by well-known companies across all sectors (Cavazos, 2019). The World Economic Forum ranks the spread of disinformation and misinformation among the world's top global risks for 2024—one that has multifaced ramifications on several areas of public interest and concern, be it education, environment, crime, or health (World Economic Forum, 2024). Despite the growing attention to disinformation across disciplines and sectors, the field suffers from expanding critiques, prominent among them being its 'western-centric' focus. A systematic review of 532 articles from a selection of the top 10 academic journals on communication studies found that only 40 referred to countries of the Global South (Rebolledo, 2024). Calls to 'de-westernize' this scholarship have emphasized the limited applicability of its analysis to Global South contexts, generalizing, as it were, from a very peculiar set of cases, be it Brexit in England or the presidential elections in the USA, often viewing it as a 'new' and 'exceptional' phenomenon linked to external conspiratorial forces (Camargo & Simon, 2022).

This apart, the theoretical relevance of such scholarship has also come under question. For example, many studies have used predominantly behaviorist frames to theorize the issue, without sufficient regard for the political economy of information, including its embeddedness in the historically racialized and gendered contexts within which it is produced (Abhishek, 2021; Kuo & Marwick, 2021; Madrid-Morales & Wasserman, 2022). Certainly, the idea that the patterns and manifestations of disinformation emerge from longer historical contexts of social polarizations, power asymmetries, and inequalities between nation-states, cultures, and institutions has gained considerable ground, with many studies now taking critical contextual approaches (Kuo & Marwick, 2021; Roberts & Karekwaivanane, 2024; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2022). Clearly, the discipline stands to benefit from deepening its engagement with non-western epistemologies and contexts.

Another critique of the field relates to its "disciplinary neighbourliness" (Harsin, 2024). With a heavy digital platform or media centric focus, the field, arguably, deprives itself of the contemporary company of disciplines such as public relations, propaganda, and political consulting (Ibid). Unsurprisingly, the set of solutions available to such a "platform determinist" (Caplan et al, 2021) approach has also been largely techno-oriented, with a focus on content moderation strategies, setting up independent fact checking units, and funding start-ups building artificial intelligence (AI) tools to combat disinformation, etc.

(Grohmann & Corpus, 2024; Kuo & Marwick, 2021). A critical mass of research now suggests that many of these tools are less effective and expansive than imagined, "especially as they move from pristine academic experiments into the messy, fast-changing public sphere" (Hsu & Thompson, 2024). AI-assisted content moderation tools, for example, lack the cultural coding required to detect politically charged localized narratives of hate and misogyny, while alternate community-led moderation interventions require considerable time and effort to develop and sustain (Udupa & Koch, 2024).

In response to the critiques highlighted above, this essay attempts to study disinformation in India and the Philippines through a feminist commodity chain lens. Through this approach, it aims to extend the frame of discussion beyond digital platforms and historicize disinformation within its longer economic and political histories. It situates itself within the tradition of critical disinformation studies (Kuo & Marwick, 2021) and carries out an intersectional analysis of power with gender and other identity-based structures across the economic, cultural, and political spheres. Consequently, it illuminates the actors, structures, institutions, and processes through which disinformation gains legitimacy while delegitimizing and discrediting a range of practices, communities, identities, and epistemologies. Ultimately, it aims to visibilize the role of disinformation in upholding and reshaping the more durable macrostructures and institutions of markets and societies. In doing so, it makes the case to extend the avenues of disinformation research and study its disciplinary intersections with gender and feminist studies, labor studies, and politics and international relations in order to produce more fruitful avenues of inquiry. It also aims to widen the policy and reform space by pointing to a broader set of actors, practices, and institutions that are implicated in the disinformation ecosystem and bringing them under scope as key nodes that need attention.

The essay is organized as follows. Section 2 briefly discusses the methodology of a feminist commodity chain approach as the specific framework within a feminist political economy tradition. Section 3 introduces the three areas of intervention for a feminist reconceptualization and offers an analysis of each of these using the key underpinnings of the feminist commodity chain analytic. Following from this, Section 4 summarizes the implications of these theorizations and then recommends actions for four sets of stakeholders—researchers or academics, policymakers, multilateral organizations or funding bodies, and civil society organizations (CSOs).

Methodology

This essay uses a feminist commodity chain approach (Collins, 2014) to unpack the scholarship on disinformation emerging from two Global South countries—India and the Philippines. The choice of countries is largely driven by the fact that their political and economic climates share some common ground. Both countries are leading destinations for outsourced information technology work and information technology-enabled services in the Global South due to their favorable business environments, skilled workforce, and cost advantages. Therefore, they have comparable digitalization trajectories (DNA, 2021; Venzon, 2023).

They also represent a contemporary political phenomenon—that of elected strongman leaders who use various forms of media extensively to fashion their personae, coupled with a particular form of 'nationalist' discourse (Ruud, 2023).

That said, the approach this essay takes is not so much to provide a comparative analysis of the disinformation value chains in these two countries. Instead, it uses the two contexts as the empirical ground to develop and apply a Global South-focused, feminist approach to knowledge production. Towards this, the essay primarily fixes its analysis at the level of the 'nation-state'. It is certainly the case that a comparative analysis of social hierarchies, identities, and groups within these countries and their role in shaping disinformation will invoke a much more multilayered analysis and deepen the level of contextual insights. These can be taken as critical lines of inquiry for future research.

A feminist commodity chain approach, with its focus on discerning and unravelling (unexpected) connections, is suited to the core objective of this essay, which is to understand and dissect the wider contexts, institutions, processes, and actors that shape disinformation (Collins, 2014). Additionally, a feminist commodity chain centers 'gender' not just in terms of understanding the gendered effects of disinformation but also as a power structure that shapes both the market and the non-market realms of disinformation, and eventually the creation and distribution of 'value' (Ibid). Critical feminist versions of commodity chain analysis allow us to hold on to knowledge about global connection while delving deep into local processes that constitute and are constituted by them (Ibid). Disinformation is well suited to be examined through this approach because it is a transnational phenomenon rooted in local relations. Furthermore, gendered and racialized structures and how they contribute to value are relatively understudied, which a feminist commodity chain analysis is well placed to theorize.

Using certain key conceptual underpinnings of this approach, this essay analyzes some of the main ideas and arguments across three broad areas of scholarship: the actors, work practices, and institutional arrangements that underpin the disinformation chain, the social reproductive dimensions of disinformation labor, and its gendered entanglements with the political machinery of nation-states. The scholarship analyzed for this essay, including the three areas chosen for a feminist conceptualization, is not based on and should not be taken as constituting an exhaustive review of the literature on disinformation. Indeed, such a review was beyond the scope of this essay. The objective, instead, is to use the feminist commodity chain analytic to not only build on but also extend some of the dominant themes through a more selective reading of literature in India and the Philippines in particular, and the Global South more broadly. Such an analysis, it is hoped, can open up alternate conceptual framings, potentially illuminating new lines of inquiry and intervention for the field.

A Feminist Reconceptualization of Disinformation: Three Areas of Intervention

Actors, work practices, and institutional arrangements that underpin the disinformation chain

Till date, the scholarship on the 'human' architecture underpinning the disinformation value chain has produced a rich set of insights, unveiling the 'invisible' sweatshops of labor—including click farm workers, content moderators, piece rate workers, etc.—embedded in highly precarious and extractive work arrangements in the Global South (Ahmad & Krzywdzinski, 2022; Roberts, 2019). By tracing the workings of transnational networks of labor and capital, this scholarship has brought to light the neocolonial underpinnings of contemporary digital platform models (Casilli, 2016; Graham & Ferrari, 2022).

A feminist commodity chain analytic extends, and usefully contests the universality of, such analysis by focusing on the workings of these transnational networks when they touch 'down' and intersect with local social relations of class and gender (Collins, 2014). For example, ethnographic scholarship on political campaigning and disinformation in India and the Philippines has surfaced the heterogeneity of work arrangements and the multiple "classes of labor" (Mezzadri & Fan, 2018) that are differentially incorporated into the production circuits. These range from the highly precarious home-based digital piece rate workers to middle-class creative workers, tech firm owners, public relations strategists, elite influencers, digital campaign managers, and political consultants (Ong & Cabañes, 2018; Udupa, 2024). Contrary to a homogenous notion of an 'outsourced digital sweatshop' that is located at the fringes of a transnational labor chain, these studies emphasize the networked nature of the human architecture, embedded in various degrees of official/unofficial, paid/unpaid, formal/informal, and illicit/aboveboard work arrangements built and shaped by historicities of local politics and cultures of production (Ibid). Preexisting practices of organized public relations (Ong & Cabañes, 2018), political marketing, and election campaigning (Udupa, 2024), as well as a rising crop of 'professional' actors, such as a political consultants and campaign strategists, who have dominated the political landscape of these countries (Sharma, 2024) emerge as important, albeit less studied, nodes in the disinformation value chain.

These studies point to the continuities as well as the departures of disinformation from historic institutional practices. They provide important entry points to undertake more critical scholarship on the political economy of disinformation, an area the feminist commodity chain analytic is especially well suited to investigate.

For example, Ong and Cabañes (2019) found that the strategies of political consulting through which disinformation is constituted are carried over from tried and tested techniques of reputation management in the world of public relations and advertising—with the chief architects of disinformation themselves being highly successful ad and PR executives who have a track record of running successful digital campaigns for household brands, etc. In India, digitalization trends are part of much longer historical trends towards corporatization and modernization of political affairs, starting from when 'computers' and 'computerization' were implicated in new imaginaries of expertise and administrative efficiency (Sharma, 2022). Interrogating these longer histories can illuminate the promise of disinformation in the new era of social media and Big Data analytics, the many actors (beyond platforms) that are embedded in these chains, and the new hierarchies and skills that digital technologies bring to an already organized industrial practice of public relations and/or political consulting.

Through its focus on gender, class, and social differentiation of labor, such an approach can visibilize how historical 'difference' shapes the accumulation of value across this chain. For instance, on the one hand, elite actors such as political strategists or public relations professionals, often hidden in plain sight, are able to profit from these operations (with little accountability). On the other hand, the more visible 'troll armies' and 'fake account operators' working at the lowest end of this chain are vilified as evil actors (Grohmann & Corpus, 2024). A critical reflection on how these differences produce very different conceptions of 'labor' and 'value', with very different consequences for workers in these settings, can surface the ways in which local labor market inequalities subsidize the operations of the more powerful actors in the disinformation value chain, both economically and politically.

Taking a feminist commodity chain approach to the human architecture of disinformation leads to an emphasis on the social relations that shape the production of disinformation (Collins, 2014). Disinformation production may permeate insidiously into domains of 'creative work'. It may also be embraced as an exciting new digital challenge in the field of advertising, an extension of one's ideological affiliations, or as just another viable option for paid work (Ong & Cabañes, 2018; Udupa, 2024). Nevertheless, it is important to view disinformation as a class-based social institution organized around commercial interests, political affiliations and sympathies, relations of social patronage, and kinship networks (Ibid.). By doing so, we can challenge linear understandings of labor vulnerability premised on the 'placement' of workers along a vertical employment ladder shaped by the global chain and/or network—instead reflecting more critically on differential incorporation of labor (Mezzadri & Fan, 2018). We can also resist over-globalized and/or platform-centric accounts of disinformation and labor, and bring in a broader constellation of (more powerful) actors under the remit of accountability and governance.

Additionally, in the context of digitally-mediated labor in particular, both India and the Philippines, by virtue of their low labor costs and high volumes of English-speaking population, have had a history of being nations of 'outsourced work' (Karanwal, 2024; Soriano, 2021). This work has occupied a coveted position in these labor markets, with both state and industry being invested in promoting its benefits.

The emergence of disinformation as another form of creative digital service work and its appeal to middle-class aspiration and entrepreneurial subjectivities, therefore, needs to be interrogated in relation to its continuities with the broader political and economic processes of global outsourcing in both India and the Philippines, which predate the emergence of the more contemporary platform work models. As a feminist commodity chain analytic usefully reminds us—tackling the double registers of history, the global and the local, can open up the role of the broader, more durable macro-institutional structures and regimes that shape practices of the everyday (Collins, 2014).

Put together, these findings suggest that a feminist commodity chain analytic can help us unpack the black box of disinformation by revealing the social relations and institutions that are constituted within and shaped by it. The actors, work arrangements, and institutional practices organized around local politics, the growing professionalization of such forms of work, and the broader global trajectories of outsourcing engage with local economies, cultures, and worker subjectivities. The peculiarities emerging from these need to be critically interrogated for their political significance to the production and consumption of disinformation.

On the whole, such an approach enables us to develop a more nuanced critique of the hierarchies of work and institutional arrangements as well as the social relations that underpin the disinformation value chain, bringing into view a broader range of actors and institutions constituted in and through it.

The social reproductive dimensions of disinformation labor

There is now a growing body of work that recognizes the role of social reproduction in generating value for the platform economy. This literature has discussed a range of topics from blurring the gendered boundaries of waged and unwaged work (Benvegnù & Kampouri, 2021), the hybridization between labor-time and life-time (Fumagalli & Morini, 2020), the immateriality of reproductive labor and its relevance to contemporary digital capitalism (Jarrett, 2014), and the expansion of platform-mediated work into the sphere of the household and other social institutions (van Doorn & Shapiro, 2023). How can we use these insights to study disinformation?

The starting point of applying a feminist commodity chain analytic to the study of disinformation is the assumption that its production does not just constitute a site of capitalist exchange, i.e., of waged work. Rather, it encompasses what has been referred to as the "social factory" or society as a whole (Jarrett, 2019). This allows us to interrogate the 'reproductive' dimensions of disinformation labor and consider how the value extraction apparatus of disinformation straddles the market and non-market spheres. Consider, for example, the cultural production of Hindutva in India, what Purohit (2023) denotes as "Hindutva pop culture"—seemingly benign yet highly insidious content comprised of poems and songs with lyrics that hint at an Islamic takeover of India or which claim to tell the truth about India's freedom struggle.

Much of this highly inflammatory, often factually incorrect information, delivered as "entertainment" by poets and cultural artists, he notes, receives considerable state patronage and, therefore, popularity, precisely because its cultural overtones lower the levels of restraint and moderation that would otherwise need to be applied to political content of a similar nature (Ibid). Here, it becomes possible to see disinformation generating value not only as a mode of production but also as a mode that reproduces Hindutva as a civilizing practice.

While, strictly speaking, these processes of disinformation appear as non-market dimensions of exchange (i.e., as sociocultural or socioreligious practices at the intersection of Hindutva, poetry, and politics), they cannot be completely disentangled from the highly marketized logics of Hindutva, which has co-opted neoliberal ideas of market driven job creation and economic growth. Consequently, it has recreated the middle-classes as 'virtuous market citizens' who view themselves as entrepreneurs and consumers but whose behavior is regulated by the framework of Hindu nationalism (Chacko, 2019). While not directly in the context of disinformation, Udupa (2015) makes a similar point in relation to the "Internet Hindus"—a group of English-educated and technologically savvy Hindutva sympathizers—noting that their labor resides in the interstitial space between sociohistorical contexts and ideological affiliations on one hand, and the market-inflicted logics of new media with its intensified leisure-as-consumption model and fetishization (and commodification) of continuous online sociality, on the other. Indeed, as Jarret (2019) argues, if we reject this false binary between culture/society/identity and the economic, we may be able to develop a sharper, more holistic understanding of the multiplicity of processes through which disinformation generates value.

Considering the co-constitutive nature of these spheres also allows us to account for the expanding value generated from affect, cognition, and other immaterial actions of workers and consumers in contemporary capitalism (Jarret, 2014). For example, the "promotional" labor deployed by "cyber troops"(Bradshaw et al, 2021)—such as youth groups, hacker collectives, fringe movements, social media influencers, and volunteers who ideologically support a cause—is "value creating". This is because in an economic sense it may be free and unpaid and also because it is a "gift of affect"—a freely given gift of political expression that is valuable to reproducing and sustaining the prevailing social orders and hierarchies it is embedded in (Jarrett, 2014). One can also see the role of affect and immaterial labor implicated in strategies of moral justification to engage in this form of work. In the Philippine context, Ong and Cabañes (2018) find that the architects of disinformation frequently employ various denial strategies that allow them to downplay commitment and responsibility to the broader sphere of political practice. These include strategies to differentiate their work from 'trolling' or 'fake news production', or taking advantage of the project-based, causal work arrangements to distance their identities from what they regard as "side jobs" (Ibid). These perspectives suggest that labor and life are entwined in complex ways, with actors organized as both economic units and as individual subjectivities (Jarret, 2019).

The lens of social reproduction, thus, allows to develop an integrated critique of disinformation labor by outlining its intersections with the market and non-market dimensions or, indeed, challenging the boundaries of these dimensions. Such a critique also allows for the mobilization of the subjects in terms of their relationality and multiplicity, rather than solely their autonomy (Ibid).

Ultimately, beyond the binary of economic incentives and ideological affiliations, disinformation as a mode of production and reproduction can contain multiple contradictions and ambivalences that have political significance for labor in the contemporary digital economy (Jarret, 2014), and the lens of social reproduction can usefully pursue these critical interrogations.

Gender and the politics of identity-based disinformation

By keeping gender as a focal point, a feminist commodity chain approach grounds its analysis in historical contexts and social difference. Such an analysis is important for two reasons. Firstly, it responds to calls for studying the field in closer relation to communities that are disproportionately impacted by disinformation, which usually tend to be historically marginalized along the lines of gender, race, religion, and ethnic identities (Camargo & Simon, 2022). Secondly, it surfaces the political significance of the kinds of information that tend to be weaponized (Kuo & Marwick, 2021) and, therefore, the role of the more durable hegemonic macrostructures that shape their emergence. As a discursive weapon, we see that gendered forms of disinformation strategically target and exploit various forms of identity-based differences in order to secure a range of politically motivated outcomes from nationalist pride to electoral benefits and policy legitimacy (White, 2024). In India, the gendering of Islamophobia, for example, through the invocation of terms such as 'love jihad' discredits Muslim men, by routinely portraying them as sinister, and Muslim women, as either in need of saving from their patriarchal backgrounds or as co-conspirators with Muslim men who seek to demographically overtake the majority Hindu community by having many children (Agajanian & Moran, 2024). Often, these discourses emerge from and fold into moral panics around gendered identities, as in the case of the Philippines, where men who are critical of the Duterte administration are frequently feminized, called gay, or accused of pedophilia (Kunze et al, 2021). Far from existing in a vacuum, these narratives have repercussions for the identities that are implicated and for whom subsequent policies may be formulated and promulgated. The case of the hijab ban in Karnataka, India, points to one such policy that claims to free Muslim women (Kaul & Menon, 2024).

To take gender seriously in studies of disinformation is to acknowledge its salience and centrality to political projects across the globe (Kaul, 2021) . In a worldwide study by the Oxford Internet Institute that analyzed emerging trends in computational propaganda, nearly 50% of the 81 countries studied were found have mis- and disinformation campaigns that drive division and polarize citizens (Bradshaw et al, 2021). Furthermore, in places where such campaigns have led to severe outcomes, including racist or ethnic violence, it was not the content per se but the political framing of the material, including the tone taken by the media and politicians towards minority groups, that was a key enabler of such violence (Adams, 2024).

In studies of authoritarianism and disinformation in the Philippines, strongman governance and sexist and misogynistic rhetoric by elected leaders were the two primary factors that influenced the production and spread of gendered disinformation (Kunze et al, 2021).

In other words, the pervasiveness of digitally mediated disinformation notwithstanding, in regimes that have historically been defined by identity-based conflicts, the barrier for producing and distributing disinformation is considerably lowered.

Ultimately, disinformation as a political strategy has the potential to fashion and strengthen a broader anti-national, anti-feminist rhetoric that can be strategically used to discredit minoritized communities and silence alternate (divergent) epistemologies. This has implications for these communities—not just as targets but also as the subjects of weaponized hate (White, 2024). Recent research also points to the material impacts of these dynamics, which may manifest as support for policies leading to removal of protections for women, marginalized, and minority communities (Kaul & Buchanan, 2023). For many countries in the Global South, disinformation also emerges as a new strategy in older trends of government suppression, including the way in which many governments in these regions have appropriated the nomenclature of 'fake news' (Cherian, 2019). Indeed, the global concern about disinformation has often provided a handy ruse for governments to exert control over citizens through measures such as internet shutdowns and harassment or imprisonment of journalists (Madrid-Morales and Wasserman, 2022). It also legitimates efforts to shape the policy discourse in a platform-determinist way, i.e., by demanding techno-centric solutions such as repurposing WhatsApp or enforcing sharing of WhatsApp metadata with government officials, which eventually serves the purpose of expanding state control over citizens (Arun, 2019).

To conclude, grounding disinformation in historic contexts of polarization and social difference allows us to unpack its gendered entanglements with the political machinery of nation-states while also revealing its tensions with the sphere of policy and intervention. Firstly, on the one hand, it emphasizes the need for stronger institutional structures, policy instruments, and remediation measures that protect the rights of those who are most marginalized. On the other, its close connection to and outsized impact on policy and policymaking sits uneasily with the fact that disinformation can come from the top, which may lead to an inability to challenge structures of power fundamental to its proliferation (Camargo & Simon 2022). Secondly, far from being an ontological given, disinformation necessarily functions as an epistemological phenomenon that builds on locally shaped, highly politicized narratives. It is, indeed, worth asking what is lost and who is predominantly served through seemingly neutral technological remedies, like fact-checking and content moderation, particularly when many of these tools are not designed to be culturally "thick" (Udupa & Koch 2024) and themselves have been appropriated to serve political ends. And finally, we need to think more critically about the intersections of gender and disinformation with other forms of hegemonies, the material impacts these have, and the identities, groups, and communities that bear their disproportionate brunt.

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

One of the key objectives of this essay has been to extend the analysis of disinformation beyond digital platforms and bring into prominence a broader set of actors, institutions, processes, and contexts that play a prominent role in its production and distribution but remain understudied for a variety of reasons. Using the feminist commodity chain analytic as its primary mode of enquiry, the essay has highlighted the heterogenous actors and institutional arrangements that constitute disinformation, the hybridity of the productive and reproductive spheres of value creation, and its gendered entanglements with the political machinery of nation-states. Put together, these findings pave the way for us to think about a broader set of tools (beyond platform-focused regulation) required across the spectrum of governments, academia, CSOs, and multilateral organizations in order to develop a more cohesive approach that strengthens the public response and capacity to identify, tackle, and mitigate the issue of disinformation. While the specifics of these tools have been outlined in the section below, it is worthwhile to first distil a few key underlying principles that should guide future efforts in these spaces. Firstly, as highlighted in the introduction, it is clear that the discipline will benefit from an increased interdisciplinary focus. Using the feminist commodity chain analytic, this essay serves as a concrete example of how the feminist political economy tradition can bring in a new set of insights to the field. In the same vein, Grohman and Corpus (2024) who have attempted to study disinformation through the lens of labor, advance the concept of "disinformation for hire as everyday labor", as a way of introducing "diverse and nontraditional ways of storytelling about the villains, victims, and heroes in the disinformation context".

Secondly, the heightened policy and regulation focus of the field must itself be critically examined in relation to who is served by these policies, and its collusions with those who are likely to benefit from more (stringent) regulation of information. If we are to shift these power dynamics, we need to unequivocally center the 'communities' that are impacted by disinformation and outline a clear agenda on how they will be best served by efforts to mitigate it. This includes, at the very least, privileging alternate epistemologies as well as strengthening representation of marginalized communities, CSOs, and non-profits in both academic scholarship as well as policy and reform.

And finally, we must balance local regulation at the level of governments and nation-states, with international cooperation measures instituted by multilateral organizations. Needless to say, these principles, and the more specific recommendations listed below are not comprehensive by any means. Rather, they represent some of the more pressing priorities that emerge from an analysis that is invested in understanding and subverting the hegemonies and hierarchies implicated in the disinformation ecosystem in order to advance a more rights-based, justice-oriented framework for change.

For researchers or academics

Research implications

- Actors and work arrangements underpinning disinformation: We need a greater focus on and more nuanced studies of the work arrangements and institutional practices that underpin the digital disinformation value chain. While this think piece only covered India and the Philippines, there is evidence of a significant diversity in these arrangements—for example, in Zimbabwe, Africa, the key instigators of disinformation are military units and party cadre supported by state-controlled media (Roberts & Karekwaivanane, 2024). Indeed, the processes of disinformation, including the boundaries of what kind of messaging is considered (un)acceptable, are as much shaped by the particularities of these arrangements as they are by platform specific affordances. Distilling the spatial and temporal dimensions of these "gray" zones (Udupa, 2024)—i.e., election campaigns, political communication, militarized campaigning, and other allied institutions and hierarchies—where disinformation or hate speech content and actions are experimented, institutionalized, professionalized, and incentivized can produce rich insights into the architecture that sustains the disinformation chain.

- Disinformation and its 'reproductive dimensions': More research is needed in order to illuminate the 'reproductive' dimensions of disinformation—forms of social cooperation between producers and consumers or users, the regimes of affect constituted in its production and circulation, and the normative sanctions and pressures that underpin the desire for such labor. This is not just about individual motivations—i.e., why do people consent to produce disinformation—but also the broader political and economic processes through which disinformation seeps insidiously into cultural production, getting normalized variously as 'creative work' or 'service work'. Another important area of research could be work that combines the production and consumption of disinformation in order to bring out its "perplexities" (Ramamurthy, 2014). Take for example the 'shock' that African workers expressed when they learned that they may have unknowingly trained the systems that Russia used against protestors (Arends, 2024). Are there ways to productively theorize the contradictions that emerge from these ambivalent sites of labor? What opportunities do they offer for building solidarities and resistance? These could be worthwhile lines of enquiry, potentially informing future research on developing resistance and anti-hate narratives.

- Gendering and racializing disinformation: We need more research on the historic continuities of social stratification and dispossession that current models of disinformation are built on, and how these are becoming increasingly salient to the global political projects. Colonial legacies have been found to be a distinctive feature of digital disinformation in countries of the Global South. For example, Roberts and Karekwaivanane (2024) note that disinformation was introduced to Africa by colonial powers; it was retained as a tool of power by post-independence administrations, with the current administrations working on upgrading it to more potent digital forms. Popular concepts such as 'filter bubbles' or 'echo chambers' determined by platform-specific affordances may be less useful when we consider such histories of colonial oppression and social polarization (Madrid-Morales & Wasserman, 2022). We also need more research on disinformation and its overlap with other forms of gendered oppressions—including its manifestations with women's health and reproductive justice, climate change, indigenous rights, etc.—in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the politics of anti-feminism and mechanisms for resistance (White, 2024).

Practice implications

- Initiate and/or fund community based, participatory research projects with marginalized communities or communities that are particularly vulnerable to disinformation. These can help amplify community voices, bridge key knowledge gaps, and develop mitigation and resilience strategies. An example of a worker-led intervention is the Data Workers Inquiry[1] project funded by the Distributed AI Research Institute in which data workers participate as community researchers to lead their own inquiry in their respective workplaces.

- Collaborate with CSOs in the Global South in order to develop locally relevant or meaningful interventions to increase awareness about and fight disinformation along with exploring opportunities for more action-oriented research that can inform future regulation and policy.

- Institutionalize knowledge sharing forums and practices between academia and practitioners working in the field of disinformation. This will develop agility to respond to its many sophisticated manifestations and strengthen the quality of theory and practice in the field.

1 Learn more about it here: https://data-workers.org/

For policymakers

- Increase awareness among key stakeholders—such as elected officials, technology entrepreneurs, media and public relations professionals, etc.—on the multifaceted nature of disinformation, and its risks and impacts on societies and nation-states.

- Recognize and prioritize disinformation as a cross-cutting issue through several important policy domains—including health, national security, democratic discourse, gender equality, and human rights—and adapt institutions and policy frameworks to address this issue in a coordinated and comprehensive way.

- Put in place mechanisms for public and stakeholder engagement—including citizens, representatives from marginalized communities, stakeholders from civil society groups, etc.—to participate in developing anti-disinformation architecture. An example of a bottom-up approach to counter disinformation is the Taiwan government's Public Digital Innovation System, where an unconventional team, including graphic designers and comedy writers, inside the government creates memes directly responding to fake news (Sinha, 2024).

- Regulate the 'gray zones' of disinformation and introduce more scrutiny and accountability measures for the 'diffuse' actors and entities in the political landscape (Sinha, 2023).

For multilateral organizations or funding bodies

- Introduce collaborative mechanisms for countries working together to share intelligence, improve research, and develop common terminologies regarding disinformation.

- Increase communication within the United Nations ecosystem to better coordinate mis- and disinformation initiatives at national levels, exchange best practices among nations, and support the development of offline initiatives.

- Work with CSOs and in-country partners to devise measures and indices for disinformation and publish them on an ongoing basis. One example of an index could be news literacy rates among youth.

- Fund civil society and academia for the development of open-source standards for sharing information on disinformation.

- Support media pluralism and quality news, including local news support, regional language press, citizen journalism efforts, and other bottom-up knowledge production models.

For CSOs

- Foster community-oriented approaches that promote collective responsibility for combating disinformation, reinforcing civic engagement and trust within societies. This includes interventions such as funding and/or amplifying community led anti-hate media programs, strengthening grassroot capacities to respond to anti-minority campaigns, etc.

- Mobilize resources (technical, legal, financial, social) for minoritized communities to stand up to disinformation and build a collective voice.

- Work with multilateral organizations to develop and publicize narratives of 'solidarity' and 'resistance'.

- Institute youth-focused, local language media literacy programs that build skills related to accessing, analyzing, evaluating, and creating content in a variety of contexts.

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