IT for Change's Inputs about Information Integrity at 'Digital Dialogues: Thinking Together about the G20 Digital Agenda'

IT for Change

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IT for Change's Anita Gurumurthy's Inputs

Digital platforms today possess enormous power to fundamentally restructure our information ecosystem and influence our information diet. What is at stake in the age of Sora — Open AI's text to video model — is much more than freedom of speech or information. With the algorithmic logic of the attention economy being deployed to remodel our socio-political institutions for disseminating propaganda, spreading misinformation and monitoring citizens — what is being hollowed out is the precious resource of public imagination, civilization's last bastion of hope.

As the loss of information integrity in data capitalism is rapidly upending our liberty to think, speak and act, this erosion reflects a big irony. It shows us that public trust is not a programmable, plug and play functionality, it is a consequence of publicness, the fine spirit of pluralism in social institutions.

Three points are important to consider in addressing this crisis:

First, the lack of a global consensus on a clear definition of critical terms like disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech, all of which are recognized threats to information integrity, has resulted in these terms being interpreted and applied by digital platforms in accordance with the values and sensibilities of the Global North. This often results in many pieces of content harmful to marginalized groups in the Global South countries escaping the radar, and expressions of minority communities being subject to wrongful removal and downgrading. Hence, there is an urgent need for a definition of these important terms that can manage the sophistication to align the right to voice and be heard with discourses on content regulation and international human rights law.

Conversely and secondly, regulatory measures to safeguard information integrity must take into account contextual and intersectional manifestations of misinformation and hate, ensuring that corporations are held accountable for the syntax of social power unleashed through their content moderation and curation tools.

Third, the impact of digital platforms on users must be examined for the public value they generate and the capabilities they create for users as civic actors in the everyday processes of democratic deliberation and dialogue. Public interest principles and values that have informed the regulation of legacy media should be extended to the regulation of platform algorithms, as they identify and target what goes into the realm of user awareness as information, thus shaping civic attitudes and beliefs.

Fourth, given that the business model and the monopoly power of the Big Tech platforms is behind the mindless algorithmic virality that is destroying the democratic fabric of societies, it is important to think of two things — 1) ways to break the monopoly power of these platforms over public discourse and 2) alternative modes of organizing digital communication platforms. Many ways to do this have been put forward by researchers and civil society. One is to explore the possibility of functionally separating content hosting from curation functions, and developing a marketplace of alternative recommender systems. It has also been proposed that governments could develop policies to encourage a diverse and plural ecology of digital media, interoperating over common protocols, and independent client-side applications).

In any case, meaningful alternatives can only emerge with political will and public investments for thriving civic publics.