

What are the most successful measures for governments and/or platforms to tackle disinformation for your generation?

A blithe optimism surrounded opinion on the internet in the early 2010s; it was seen as a liberating instrument, as that which could mobilise the disenfranchised and silenced. But less than a decade has passed, and the picture painted is now one of a festering ground for the least reflective human tendencies, a tool for authoritarian regimes to weaponise information against democracy. Until now, it has been a question of whether or not to regulate. Today, it is a question of how.

Beyond the traditional sphere of politics, there is a hidden world beyond most legislators' grasp. One dominated by names like Nick Fuentes, Sargon of Akkad and Lauren Southern, who parrot the stories often denoted as "Pants on Fire" by PolitiFact and appear under bold headlines under tags of the "alt-right" pipeline or radicalisation in the few occasions their immense influence is covered outside the online sphere. These were the people I already as an 11-year-old through YouTube had been exposed to and made me prone to disinformation.

In a story that mirrors so many of my generation, I was a rootless, mildly socially alienated, and privileged teenager who spent most of my free time on a combination of video games and watching others play them. Pretty much the ideal type for the identity these personalities would leverage to mobilise one into this subculture. The event that rings most notable in my mind was that of "GamerGate", that they constructed as this invasion of our safe space by mainstream, misguided politics, stoking resentment through this metonymic caricature of feminism they had constructed. By evoking this feeling of marginalisation among gamers, empathising with us, understanding our issues, it led us to trust them and distrust those mainstream institutions they claimed vilified us for our edgy brand of humour.

The tactic was one of exploiting and exacerbating a deficiency of trust, as they acted as our medium to politics. What they did was somewhere between the falsely dichotomous construction of disinformation and misinformation. Their explicit intention was not to harm, but the incentive structures, the recommendation algorithms of these platforms often favour sensationalism. It was a question of finding the next big, egregious story they could spin and fuel this "outrage machine", even if the sources were dubious and outright false.

They were not stupid. In their coverage of media, they had a sharp eye for criticising half-baked sensationalist opinion pieces masquerading as news. The issue was they were not consistent in their treatment of news. This was perhaps most vividly depicted during the Covid era: whenever official sources endorsed a vaccine, they would dig up every single possible reason for doubting it. Few peer-reviewed studies, small n, poor methodology, etc. But when something like hydroxychloroquine came from sources branding themselves as "alternative" media, they would be satisfied with a single, pre-publication paper and boldly claim they had found the magic. It predisposed us to disinformation through a dangerous double standard.

If this story is truly representative of the experience of a significant part of my generation, as I purport it to be, the issue is not that can be solved by deplatforming, fact-checking, nor platforms “voluntarily” engaging in removing potentially harmful content alone. My generation is not one of uncritical recipients of information. The critical problem among my generation is one of misplaced trust, where para-social relationships have founded a new basis of trust. It is foremost a question of recovering confidence in media and governmental institutions. We cannot solely rely on platform regulation that in isolation only provides fodder for these creators’ claim of them and their audience being silenced and further marginalised, as the community is pushed deeper underground into insulated message boards on 4chan and the like.

Governments need to promote better media-policies and journalism to regain this trust. We already have an idea for how this could look: those countries employing what is traditionally called a Nordic model of journalism, emphasising strong institutionalised journalistic self-regulation, and publicly funded impartial news, have not suffered this crisis. NPR, public sources in general, stand at far greater trust-ratings across political leanings in the US despite growing polarisation. Only by funding public, impartial sources, and by strengthening good journalism can governments win back some of the trust that has rightfully been eroded.

Education can foster a greater resilience towards threats as disinformation. My high school had the peculiar quirk of making a philosophy course mandatory. This could be one concrete example of what initiatives governments could take. The course answered the far more difficult, but more wide-spanning and fundamental question of “why?” Epistemology taught me why I could trust some sources more than others; and political philosophy, another mode of political engagement than resentful rhetoric, while indirectly justifying political institutions, providing the context behind their existence and the trade-offs inherent in any mode of government.

It is by improving awareness and media-deficiencies and creating a critical citizenry, rather than ill-informed ad hoc measures, we get to the root of the problems that predisposed my generation to disinformation. As depicted with the recently adopted Digital Services Act in the EU, current legislation works only as a plaster over the underlying issues. Such measures will remain ineffective as long as governments do not heal the festering wound below it.