Research needed for how online misinformation spreads

Over the past decade, as public conversation has moved increasingly online, there has been a corresponding rise in concern about the spread of harmful and polarizing information. Public debate on what to do about these problems suffers from the lack of fact based analysis of the prevalence of and means by which harmful messaging spreads. Such analysis is crucial for evaluating proposed interventions by and regulation of digital platforms.

What exactly is “reasonably public” platform content?

When people communicate on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, there is typically a distinction between paid content—advertisements or sponsored posts—and “organic” content, or public posts by individuals or organizations. Think: the difference between a Facebook ad sponsored by a political candidate, versus a public post by the same candidate that anyone visiting the platform can see. Generally “reasonably public” content falls into a number of categories:

• “high engagement” content, such as:
  » public posts that reach a certain level of virality;
  » public posts in the largest public online forums, such as the Reddit feed r/wallstreetbets;
  » public content from accounts with very large audiences, such as those of so-called influencers.

• public content from government bodies and officials, as well as official candidates for office, regardless of size.

If content is already public, why do we need transparency?

If people can already visit platforms to see public posts, why are some researchers, advocates, and journalists asking for transparency? There is a critical difference between visiting posts one by one on digital platforms and collecting large amounts of data in machine-readable formats, easily analyzed programmatically. Yes, a platform user can click on each individual post made in their newsfeed; however, if such content were made available in an API (Application Programming Interface) or dataset, a researcher could quickly analyze how often a piece of content served to them by a platform is promoted to all users.

Proposals before Congress

• The Platform Accountability and Transparency Act would require the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to develop regulations requiring platform disclosure of “certain content and user accounts.”

• The Digital Services Oversight and Safety Act would require large platforms to provide transparency of “high-reach public content” in a “searchable, machine-readable format” to regulators and certified researchers.

Misinformation news sources more engaging than factual news sources on Facebook

Researchers from New York University, the Université Grenoble Alpes, and the French National Centre for Scientific Research conducted a system-level analysis of user engagement with misinformation from news sources on Facebook. They found that, around the U.S. 2020 elections, news sources spreading misinformation generated six times the engagement compared to news sources with a record of factual reporting. Mandated data for “reasonably public” platform content would make data for similar analyses more accessible.

Source: “Understanding Engagement with (Mis)Information News Sources on Facebook” September 2021.