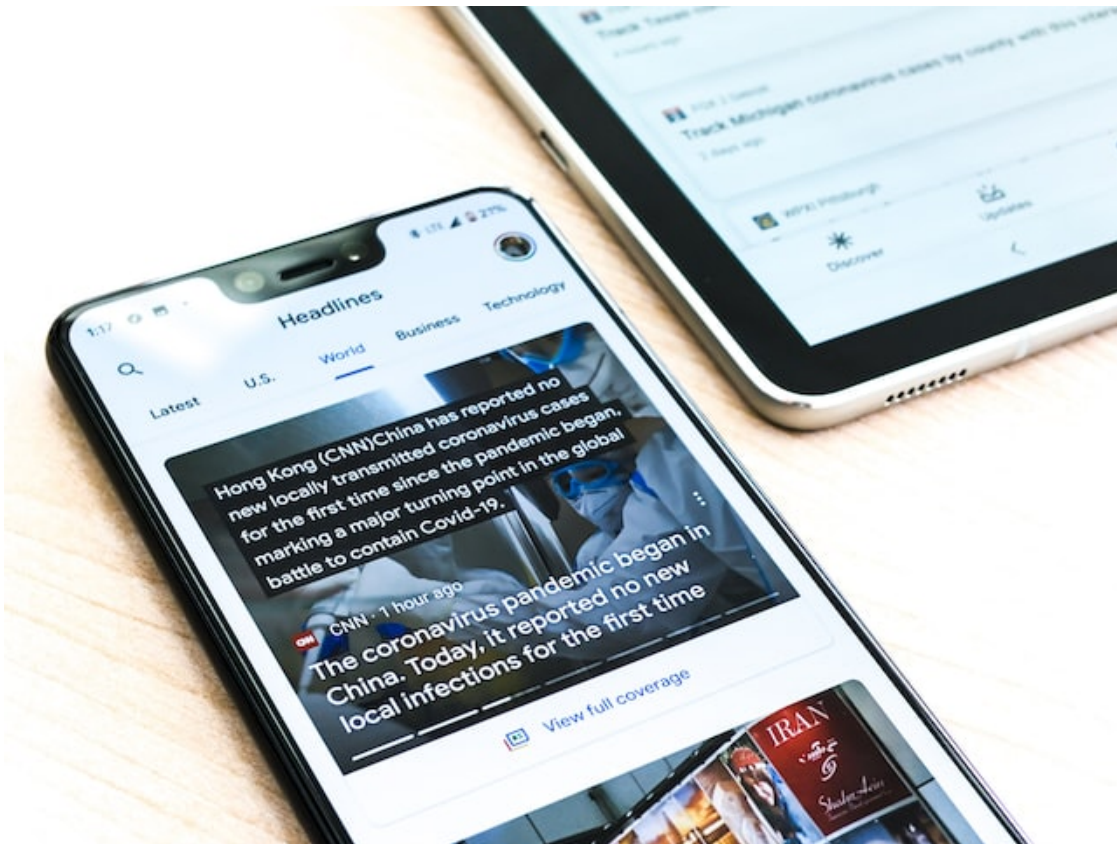


January 27, 2023

Welcome back to our weekly newsletter, where we explore the intersection of tech, ethics, and social impact.

Unfinished supports [Project Liberty](#) in engaging diverse voices to build the critical digital infrastructure that catalyzes change.

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Disinformation and its threat to democracy

We are facing an information crisis around the world—where digital and social media have enabled the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation that threaten elections and influence democracies.

At the root of this crisis is a lack of trust—in the media, in politicians, and even in what is true and what is not.

From Brazil to Ukraine to China, social media sites and other digital tools are exploited to spread malicious information campaigns.

To bring us up to speed on mis/disinformation, we sat down with [Ryan Merkley](#), Managing Director of [Aspen Digital](#). Merkley is an expert on the information crisis and was instrumental in the [Wikimedia Foundation](#)'s defense and response to disinformation. He has also served as the director of the Aspen Institute's [Commission on Information Disorder](#).

Defining disinformation and misinformation

[Disinformation and misinformation](#) both contain false information, but *disinformation* is false information that is deliberately shared to cause harm, whereas *misinformation* is false information shared by people unaware that it's false.

The goals of disinformation campaigns

Merkley says there are often two objectives to disinformation campaigns:

1. **Drive action (or inaction)** of a particular audience by “sowing division and discontent by using false statements or out-of-context material to confirm biases and suspicions people already have, in an effort to make people lash out at a particular group, or to discourage voters from going to the polls, or to make them unreceptive to facts that will eventually come to light.”
2. **“Destabilize the foundations of trust**, by undermining our faith in the individuals, organizations, and institutions we look to to make choices about our lives and wellbeing.”

One of the problems is that disinformation is still not fully understood. Mathieu Lefevre, CEO and Co-Founder, [More in Common](#), a research institute that addresses the underlying drivers of fracturing and polarization, says, “Too little research has been done to study the average person’s understanding of disinformation: we don’t know how it impacts people, how or even if it is being talked about around the dinner table. Much of our knowledge is confined to elite circles. This explains why disinformation has fairly low political salience and why attempts to counter disinformation and disrupt the business models that encourage it are not 'landing enough punches.'”

More in Common believes it's critical to understand how the public thinks about disinformation to foster solutions that will stick and get political traction.


The role of digital platforms


Merkley says: “Today’s social media sorts us each by our own biases—it’s like a terrible, polarizing sorting hat. We end up surrounded by content and contributors who agree with us and validate our biases. It feels good, but it doesn’t lead to healthy discourse or useful disagreement and resolution of tradeoffs.”


While digital platforms and social media can be mediums of disinformation, a recent report from Pew Research found that across both developed and emerging economies, there is a shared sense that social media also gives people a voice in local politics.


The battle for truth around the world


The information crisis is a global problem. Here are a few examples:

 **Brazil:** The recent pro-Bolsonaro insurrection in Brazil followed a similar digital playbook to the January 6th insurrection in the US where protestors used tech platforms to spread conspiracy theories, foment mass delusion, and strategically plan the insurrection on the Brazilian capitol.

 **India:** The Indian government has proposed legislation that would prevent social media platforms from hosting any information that the government deems untrue. The press cried foul, arguing this is an example of government censorship.

 **The Philippines:** The press have claimed that the current president, Bongbong Marcos, was elected last year on a wave of disinformation.

 **Russia:** Russia has been steadily spreading disinformation in conjunction with its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, from gaslighting the global community on its “special military operation” to false claims about Ukrainian refugees.

 **China:** China has been barraging Taiwan with disinformation for years; Taiwan wins the award for the country most targeted by disinformation. According to a recent report from Brookings, disinformation is rampant across the Asian continent.

Can Legislation help?

Changes might be coming. Merkley points out that “the next 12-24 months will tell us a lot about the role governments can play in combating disinformation. The European Union has approved the Digital Services Act and the European Code of Practice, which will impose new levels of transparency and accountability on large platforms hosting content online. This law will be rolled out across the EU’s member states, and will be enforced with punitive fines if there is a lack of compliance.

Many nations worldwide—including in the US where there have been few successful changes to legislation targeting platform accountability—are watching closely to see if these laws are effective at making users safer, and improving online discourse.”

In the United States, [the state of New Jersey announced](#) earlier this month that it will require public schools to teach media literacy to students as a way to equip them with the tools to identify misinformation and disinformation.

The path forward

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to the information crisis, but Merkley outlines five changes that will help:

1. Change the approach to journalism by focusing on building trust and integrity in an environment of mistrust (check out [American Journalism Project](#) to see how they are bringing back local news in an effort to provide citizens with the tools to safeguard democracy)
2. Renew the focus on consumer privacy, data privacy, and require transparency of tech platforms (check out [Project Liberty](#)'s work here)
3. Hold political leaders who lie for personal and political benefit accountable, and refuse to spread their false claims as if they were newsworthy (check out the work [Rappler](#) is doing to hold politicians accountable in the Philippines)
4. Seek out new business models in technology that don't rely on the collection and exploitation of personal data and attention-seeking algorithms (like subscription-based business models that are incentivized to protect user privacy instead of selling user data, as [Jeffrey Edell points out in Gizmodo](#))
5. Find ways for citizens to talk to each other again, engaging in civil, fact-based discourse, and rebuild trust through healthy disagreement (check out the [One Small Step](#) initiative from Story Corps)

At Unfinished Live last year, [Maria Ressa](#) gave a [powerful talk on the information crisis](#). The founder of the Filipino news organization Rappler, Ressa won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021 for her organization's work defending democracy by fighting disinformation in the Philippines. Last year, she outlined a [10-point plan](#) to fight the information crisis.

Both Merkley and Ressa believe we can fight misinformation and disinformation, but it will take a multifaceted approach in everything from changing the [underlying protocols](#) of our digital spaces to reimagining how we report the news.



Other notable headlines

🚫 **Trump is no longer banned.** Former President Donald Trump [will be allowed to return to Facebook and Instagram](#) in the coming weeks, according to [an announcement by Meta](#) on Wednesday. It's been two years since Trump was banned for inciting violence in the January 6th insurrection on the US Capitol. Meta will impose new guardrails to "deter repeat offenses."

📖 **Arbiters of truth on Wikipedia.** As Wikipedia takes on thornier edits and updates to its pages, what it means to be an editor for the site is changing too. Instead of simply citing sources, its editors are engaging in healthy debate and discussion about how historical figures would have wanted to be understood. For an internet prone to incivility, [Noam Cohen reports in *The Atlantic*](#) that these deliberations amongst Wikipedia's editors are shockingly civil and thoughtful as they aspire to represent the truth.

🔥 **Tipping the scales at TikTok.** According to inside sources at TikTok, in addition to letting the algorithm decide what content goes viral, staff at TikTok and ByteDance secretly hand-pick specific videos and supercharge their distribution, using a practice known internally as "heating." [Emily Baker-White from *Forbes* reports](#) that TikTok has used heating to court influencers and brands, enticing them into partnerships by inflating their videos' view count.

💻 **Labor rights for content moderators.** Like many other major tech platforms, OpenAI uses low-paid content moderators to ensure that ChatGPT's generative AI is (mostly) free from violent and hateful content. [Kenyan reporter Nanjala Nyabola of *Al Jazeera* explores](#) the ethical implications of using Kenyan content moderators, who are paid less than \$2 per hour, to process content that often leads to secondary trauma.

📱 **Linking Facebook with declining mental health.** As Facebook expanded across college campuses, it led to a negative impact on student mental health and worse academic performance. This is the finding from a new study by researchers Luca Braghieri and Alexey Makarin, who went on the [Tech Policy Press podcast](#).

💡 Partner News

📢 **Funding Available!** McCourt Institute has launched its annual grants program, in partnership with Georgetown University. The program funds technologists, ethicists, legal scholars and social scientists working in collaboration to explore and articulate novel uses and misuses of technology, its effects on individuals and society, and how to address the challenge of new technologies born in the information age. This year Georgetown will be opening the grants process to include collaboration with civil society, NGOs and partner academic institutions. Proposals are due on February 27th. Learn more [here](#).

🏆 **Submit your work!** [The Webby Awards](#) is proud to introduce categories to recognize Responsible Tech work. As part of their mission to honor the best of

the internet and inspire new work within this space, the categories include: Accessible Technology, Responsible Information, Responsible Innovation, Sustainable Technology. Participating in the Webby's is a great way to showcase that you and your team are at the forefront of Responsible Tech work and to champion and bring awareness to this important social issue. This is your last chance to enter your work by the **Extended Entry Deadline** on February 10th.

Thank you for reading.

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