



## SUPPLY VERSUS DEMAND SIDE

TOWARDS AN ANALYTIC FRAMEWORK AND A TAXONOMY OF SOLUTIONS FOR THE PROBLEM OF ONLINE MIS/DISINFORMATION

Anya Schiffrin,  
Columbia University and University  
of Navarra  
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## 2016: A WAKEUP CALL

The events of 2016, including the votes for Brexit and Donald Trump as well as the later Cambridge Analytica scandal, raised awareness about the prevalence and types of online dis/misinformation (Wardle 2016) (Tandoc, Lim, Ling 2018).

Anti-vaxxer and conspiracy theories re: mass shootings, etc. only confirmed fears that something had to be done.

- Not just the Russians but also political advertising, microtargeting

While the precise impact that online dis/information had on these events was often difficult to assess, it was clear that a “weaponization of the digital influence machine” had taken place (Nadler, Crain & Donovan 2018).

# TACKLING DIS/MISINFORMATION

This paper looks at the solutions that were/are proposed.

We argue that in the fog of war in 2016, it seemed that action was required; policymakers, the social media platforms, entrepreneurs, journalists, and educators galvanized by setting up committees, commissions, research groups, and in some instances, even laws aimed at tackling the problem of online dis/misinformation.

These steps were taken while the academic research was still underway, and so the proposed solutions were often not fully informed by evidence as to what could actually work. However, the imperative to do something necessitated taking actions before all the relevant information was in place (Engelke 2019) (Nelson 2018).

This paper provides a taxonomy of the variety of initiatives aimed at solving the problem, with the objective of enhancing our understanding of the strengths and limitations of each.

Our analysis is set in the context of the academic literature on the problems of propaganda and dis/misinformation and media trust and we provide historical context for many of the solutions.

# SUPPLY VS. DEMAND SIDE

## DEMAND SIDE

Raising awareness eg Media literacy training, Covering the platforms

Community participation  
*i.e.*, in local news reporting  
Building Trust & engagement

Fact-checking, labeling, Browser extensions that audiences can use

## SUPPLY SIDE

Algorithms—suppression, downranking of content, removal of bots

Regulation  
*i.e.*, hate speech laws  
Intermediary liability

Transparency and disclosure  
*i.e.*, truth in advertising

Counterspeech and providing more speech eg Support for Media pluralism and quality news including local news support

What camp  
you fall into  
affects  
which  
solutions  
you support

# WHY SO MANY DIFFERENT SOLUTIONS?

Why do so many thoughtful and experienced people come up with such radically different solutions to the problem of online mis/disinformation?

1) Different **financial interests** involved.

2) **Underlying beliefs** of the groups proposing the solutions, including the US aversion to government regulation, contrasted with distrust in self-regulation in many other parts of the world.

3) The **exposure effect**, as repeated exposure to an idea breeds support for it (Zajonc 1968). Organizations do what they naturally are used to doing and this familiarity makes them think they are doing the right thing. This can lead to escalating commitment once a path is pursued.

# DEMAND SIDE

Demand-side solutions are popular because they seem easier to implement in that they don't require govt controversial regulation.

- Foundations are investing money in demand-side solutions.
- Journalists are making efforts to promote journalism and build trust.

This approach is more attractive for the social media platforms because it takes the onus off them and puts it on journalists and consumers.

Evidence of success is lacking, and demand-side solutions are difficult to scale/slow to work if they do work.

Some demand siders argue that fake news and mis/disinformation has always existed, and that accordingly, there is no reason to panic and little evidence that its audiences are persuaded by what they see online (Allcott, Gentzkow & Yu 2018).

# ONGOING DEMAND-SIDE SOLUTIONS

Wedded to the belief that trust in the media is somehow related to journalism practice, journalists hope to improve standards and build trust through engagement and through fact-checking (Ferrucci 2017) (Wenzel 2019) (Nelson 2018) (Graves 2016).

Bolster media literacy efforts. (A broad umbrella with many groups and efforts)

Pros: raises awareness about journalism, part of civic engagement and citizenship

Cons: Academic literature on the effectiveness is fragmented and inconclusive.

# DEMAND SIDE: MEDIA TRUST/COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The rationale:

- Falling trust in media at least partially draws on its failure to counter the flood of false and inaccurate claims in today's information wars.
- So restoring trust in media requires that journalists redouble efforts to act as society's fact-finding resource.

Building trust in media/community engagement

Pros: could help support sustainability of journalism

Cons: not clear that this will actually diminish credibility of false information.

Expensive, hard to scale



# FACT-CHECKING AND LABELING

Solution Hire fact-checkers to label mis- and disinformation to encourage readers to reject it.

Cons:

Lack of consistent results, effectiveness varies by topic and public being targeted (Wardle)

Repeated exposure may aggravate the problem, as the more audiences see something the more they believe it (Pennycook, Cannon, Rand 2018) even if it's factually incorrect and later discredited.

Corrections may not be seen by the people who originally saw the false information and may not be persuasive when someone's mind is made up and they want to see their ideas confirmed (Kolbert 2017).

Indeed, corrections, rather than having the intended effects, may only enhance distrust (Karlsson Clerwall, Nord 2017).

Pros: helps create and support a culture of truth, signaling, second generation fact-checking works in some instances (Cunliffe-Jones/Zommer) . Builds relationships among journalists. (Graves)

Label disinformation, create global standards. Examples: News Guard, Trust Project

- Complicating questions: What labels to use? How to establish the credibility of labelers?
- Pros: self regulation, avoids violating the First Amendment. Helps advertisers make good decisions.

# JOURNALISM TRUST INITIATIVE

A media self-regulatory initiative launched by Reporters Without Borders in 2018.

Aims to articulate a comprehensive set of trust and transparency standards that will guide the media in enforcing its own standards.

- Transparency of media ownership and sources of revenue.
- Journalistic ethics and norms of media independence.
- Reliability and accuracy of information.

The vision is that these standards will become the industry's leading benchmark, and that ever more media outlets will formally commit to them by joining the **Workshop Agreement** of the European Centre of Standardization.

Membership could then become an instrument in allocating media funding, and the basis of a trusted media label.

The logo features the text "#JournalismTrustInitiative" in a bold, sans-serif font. The hashtag symbol and the words "Journalism" and "Initiative" are white, while the word "Trust" is red. The entire text is enclosed within a thin white rectangular border, which is itself centered on a solid black rectangular background.

#JournalismTrustInitiative

# SUPPLY SIDE-ALGORITHMS

The large platforms and tech entrepreneurs seek to suppress disinformation by doing what they know how to do i.e. hiring content moderators, changing platform algorithms and blocking certain kinds of false or inciteful content (Dreyfuss & Lapowsky 2019).

Pros: Convenient. No complicated discussions about free speech, what is truth etc. A hope that the problem will just go away. Means the platforms clean up the mess they created.

Cons: corporate censorship, lack of transparency. Limits to what the algorithms can do. debates

Where there is an intersection with government regulation (another supply side) there are debates about free speech

“One of the most important questions in the current speech governance debate is how far governments will go in mandating proactive filtering. They are moving towards this for illegal content, but are also considering it for harmful content, which is hugely problematic from a free speech perspective.”—Vera Franz, Information Program, Open Society Foundation

# AI: BUSINESS MODELS

Dozens of small startups, some funded by friends and family, some with startup funding from investors or government

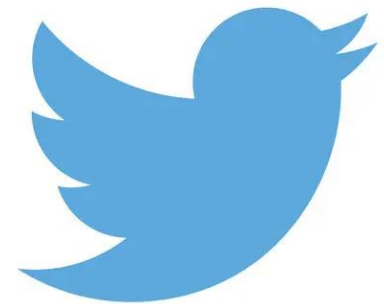
Using human intelligence or natural language processing or both

Some are hoping for commercial applications

Need to be bought or used by Facebook or Google or Twitter

Hoping that advertisers can bring pressure to bear on the social media platforms

Could the platforms just do it themselves if they wanted to? Some mixed views on this



# SUPPLY SIDE: REGULATION

**Many countries, including the United Kingdom,** are considering an expanded government role.

*One example: Disinformation and 'Fake News' Final Report: House of Commons, February 2019.*

Calls for a concerted government response to the Russian disinformation threat.

Proposes a range of legislation/policies:

- Liability for the social media platforms
- Codes for political advertising
- Mandated disclosure by social media platforms
- Auditing and scrutiny of the platforms and their algorithms
- Protection of user data
- Antitrust measures
- Professional code of ethics for the tech companies



House of Commons  
Digital, Culture, Media and  
Sport Committee

## Disinformation and 'fake news': Final Report

**Eighth Report of Session 2017–19**

*Report, together with formal minutes relating  
to the report*

*Ordered by the House of Commons  
to be printed 14 February 2019*

# SUPPLY SIDE: REGULATION

## Direct

Restrictions on hate speech

Disclosure of political advertising (in a systematic way)

## Indirect

Provides incentives to the platforms to act- intermediary liability

# LEGAL REMEDIES—INTERMEDIARY LIABILITY

2017 Germany passed the NETZDG law, effective Jan 1 2018

- Fines for platforms which have a “systematic and persistent” pattern of disseminating illegal content (Theil) Social media sites must remove it within 24 hrs or pay fines up to €50 million.
  - Hate speech means Nazi symbols, Holocaust denial
  - Sites affected: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google, others

22 pre-existing categories of what is illegal (Tworek)

Required: ways to report such content

Has reduced spread of illegal content

However, It's extremely difficult to know exactly the effects of the law has been because the disclosure has been incomplete as well as inconsistent between the different platforms (Tworek)( Gollatz, Riedel and Pohlmann). (Heldt) (Theil)

The US has a commitment to the First Amendment and free expression that will preclude many possible solutions that other countries might be willing to undertake (Benkler, Faris, Roberts 2018).

# LEGAL REMEDIES - CONS

All forms of legislation and government oversight have their own drawbacks. Some can make the problem worse.

**Brett Solomon** of Access Now sees three key risks:

1. A mechanism to review content must include methods and tools of a **surveillance regime**. How can you judge the legality of content without seeing what it is?
2. Removing illegal content calls for a framework, process and tools — that is, a **copyright regime**.
3. And in many cases, if certain content is searched for, alternative content needs to be served up which is more acceptable. That might give rise to a **propaganda regime**, which swaps out “bad” content for “good.”

Takeaway: In the name of protecting democracy, conditions for a surveillance, censorship and propaganda state can arise. This outcome is known as **authoritarianism**.





# SUPPLY SIDE: DISCLOSURE OF POLITICAL ADVERTISING ONLINE

- US laws on political advertising currently don't include online political ads; standards of truth in advertising currently don't apply to the web.
- Federal Court struck down an Ohio law mandating truth in advertising in 2014.

## Local rights:

- Seattle's 1997 law required organizations that accept money for political advertising to provide information about the money's source. New York and Maryland too.

## Transparency and disclosure

- Unlike the banks, social media are not obliged to “know your customer” and keep info on file with the government—or release it if requested. (Another example: States have imposed disclosure requirements on drug companies.)
- Starting in May 2018, Facebook and Twitter now verify identities and locations of political ad buyers and disclose this info to their audiences.

# CONCLUSION

**Problem seems urgent but solutions fragmented**

Countries and platforms will apply a mix of solutions.

Balancing freedom of expression with targeting disinformation/misinformation will be hard.

Each country will have different standards.

Does that mean there is no global internet?