New study unveils strategies to combat disinformation wars on social media

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In an era where social media platforms have become battlegrounds for information integrity, a new study sheds light on the mechanics of disinformation spread and offers innovative solutions to counteract it.

Conducted by a team of researchers from Brandeis University, George Mason University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Carnegie Mellon University examined the dynamics of "disinformation wars," which refers to the intentional spread of fake news while pretending to be an ordinary account or user on platforms like X (formerly known as Twitter). This method has proved to be alarmingly effective in misleading the public.

"Our findings reveal a disturbing trend of entities engaging in disinformation wars, using the anonymity and reach of social media to influence political and social narratives," said Maryam Saeedi, Assistant Professor of Economics at the Tepper School of Business at Carnegie Mellon University, and study co-author. "This manipulation is not only a direct threat to democratic processes but also to the general public's ability to discern truth from fiction."

The research emphasizes the urgency of addressing the spread of fake news, particularly highlighting the sophisticated tactics employed by some regimes and organizations to manipulate public opinion.

The study introduces a new preemptive strategy known as "ex-ante content moderation," which involves assigning a disinformation score to accounts based on their likelihood of spreading false information. This approach aims to proactively identify and mitigate the impact of disinformation before it reaches a wide audience.

They evaluated the strategy's effectiveness through a case study on the disinformation campaigns during the protests in Iran after the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022. By categorizing accounts and analyzing a unique dataset of posts in Farsi from September 2019 to March 2023, the research offers a comprehensive view of how disinformation can be systematically identified and countered.

Saeedi highlights the importance of this study in the current geopolitical climate: "As digital platforms continue to play a crucial role in shaping public discourse, understanding and countering disinformation campaigns is imperative for the preservation of democratic values and the protection of human rights."

The findings in this study carry important implications for policymakers, social media platforms, and the general public. The researchers advocate for a collaborative effort between technology companies, governments, and civil society to implement and refine content moderation strategies that can effectively combat the dissemination of fake news.

"This study is a call to action," said Saeedi. "It underscores the critical need for innovative and preemptive measures to safeguard our information ecosystem from those who seek to undermine it through disinformation campaigns."

As disinformation evolves, the strategies outlined in this study provide a foundation for future efforts to ensure the authenticity and reliability of information in the digital age.

More information: Working paper issued through the Brookings Center on Regulation and Markets: www.brookings.edu/articles/disinformation-wars/

Provided by Tepper School of Business, Carnegie Mellon University

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