

Perspective | Published: 05 June 2024

Misunderstanding the harms of online misinformation

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Nature **630**, 45–53 (2024)

17k Accesses | **52** Citations | **867** Altmetric | [Metrics](#)

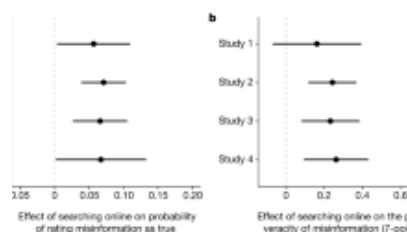
Abstract

The controversy over online misinformation and social media has opened a gap between public discourse and scientific research. Public intellectuals and journalists frequently make sweeping claims about the effects of exposure to false content online that are inconsistent with much of the current empirical evidence. Here we identify three common misperceptions: that average exposure to problematic content is high, that algorithms are largely responsible for this exposure and that social media is a primary cause of broader social problems such as polarization. In our review of behavioural science research on online misinformation, we document a pattern of low exposure to false and inflammatory content that is concentrated among a narrow fringe with strong motivations to seek out such information. In response, we recommend holding platforms accountable for facilitating exposure to false and extreme content in the tails of the distribution, where consumption is highest and the risk of real-world harm is greatest. We also call for increased platform transparency, including collaborations with outside researchers, to better evaluate the effects of online misinformation and the most effective responses to it. Taking these steps is especially important outside the USA and Western Europe, where research and data are scant and harms may be more severe.

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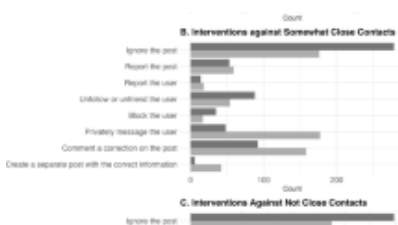
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Main

Social media platforms have become ubiquitous in modern life, prompting great interest in their effects on society. Debates over social media’s impact often include claims that social media platforms and algorithms facilitate high levels of exposure to misinformation and other harmful content¹, which in turn cause social problems ranging from polarization to political violence^{2,3}. Broad causal claims like these appear frequently in influential public discourse about social media, including in articles written by prominent social scientists². For example, a widely discussed article in *The Atlantic* argues that “social media amplifies political polarization; foments populism, especially right-wing populism; and is associated with the spread of misinformation”². Similarly, *The New York Times* op-eds have argued that “YouTube may be one of the most powerful radicalizing instruments of the 21st century” and that “The dominant digital

platform companies, including Facebook and Google ... have created a haven for dangerous misinformation and hate speech that has undermined trust in democratic institutions”^{4,5}. These concerns are echoed by both politicians⁶ and members of the US public^{7,8,9}, who say that social media has a negative impact on society and cite misinformation as a primary reason¹⁰.

Assertions like these suggest that exposure to false content on social media has been shown to cause massive social harms. However, we do not believe that compelling empirical evidence exists supporting these claims. The question of whether and when exposure to this type of content on social media causes harm is complex, a matter of active debate among researchers and extremely difficult to conclusively answer. Although disjunctures between public discourse and scholarly work are a problem in many fields^{11,12,13,14}, we argue that unsupported or disputed claims about widespread exposure to (and effects of) misinformation on social media are particularly concerning because they can shape the actions of platforms, legislators and regulators, diverting attention from other ways in which misinformation can cause harm.

Before proceeding, we note that this Perspective focuses strictly on the potential effects of exposure to false and inflammatory content on social media. We acknowledge that reasons for concern exist about other potential harms from social media such as negative effects on mental health and well-being^{15,16} and social trust^{17,18} (see Table 1 for a summary or ref. ¹⁹ for a review). Although these other potential harms are also important, concerns about misinformation have been a focus of much of the public discourse around social media. In addition, narrowing our focus allows for a more thorough review of the relevant literature.

The public debate that we engage with concerns the effects on mass opinion of exposure to misinformation and extremist (for example, white supremacist, alt-right) content on social media. That debate often centres on three claims that are largely unsupported by academic research: (1) average exposure to misinformation is high and growing; as a result, a substantial fraction of the population is exposed to it frequently (for example,

refs. [20,21,22,23,24](#)); (2) exposure to this content is primarily driven by the platforms' algorithms rather than by individual users deliberately seeking out such content (for example, refs. [1,3,25,26,27,28](#)); and (3) correlations between exposure to false and extremist content on social media platforms and undesirable psychological or behavioural outcomes reflect causal effects (for example, refs. [2,29,30,31,32](#)).

These claims (often assumed rather than asserted explicitly) influence public debate, diverting attention from other potential sources of harm. For example, following the 2016 US presidential election, public attention (including congressional hearings) quickly centred on the possibility that Russia had used social media platforms to shape the beliefs and opinions of large numbers of US voters, in turn affecting their vote choice³³. But academic research subsequently showed that exposure to these claims represents a tiny part of people's information diets and is not associated with changes in voter attitudes or behaviour³⁴. Moreover, this outsize focus on mass persuasion ignored the skew in on-platform information diets that the Russian influence operations helped to reveal. That is, exposure to tweets from Russian influence accounts was disproportionately higher among Republicans and was concentrated in a small set of users³⁵—just 1% were responsible for 70% of exposures, and 10% were responsible for 98% of exposures³⁴. Other examples show a similar pattern: exposure to problematic content is rare in general and is heavily concentrated among a small minority of people who already have extreme views (for example, refs. [36,37](#)).

Similarly, public discourse about social media has been shaped by the assumption that platform algorithms are the primary cause of exposure to false and extremist content online. For example, a 2022 article in *The New York Times* begins by stating that “It is well known that social media amplifies misinformation and other harmful content” and then proceeds to cite non-academic work by an advocacy group¹. Broad assertions like these neglect a growing body of research on consumer demand for false and extremist content^{36,38}, the role of media and political elites in exposing people to misinformation^{39,40}, and how platform affordances enable the distribution of such content to subscribers and followers^{37,39,41,42}. In short, although algorithms

indisputably shape the content people see, we interpret recent empirical evidence as suggesting that, on average, these algorithms tend to push users to more moderate content and to offer extreme content predominantly to those who have sought it out^{36,38,43}. Increasing public attention to this research will help to foster a broader conversation about other mechanisms of misinformation dissemination and harm besides algorithms.

Finally, social media is particularly vulnerable to the human tendency to confuse correlation with causation. Surveys show that US citizens blame social media for the spread of misinformation, political incivility and even political violence^{7,8,9}. This tendency may reflect the temporal association between social media usage levels and negative social trends of the past two decades as well as the way in which social media content refracts societal ills. However, much of the research explicitly designed to identify causal effects does not support these claims^{15,44,45,46}.

These misunderstandings are often exacerbated by data limitations, such as a reliance on measures of sharing and other forms of engagement rather than direct measures of exposure to social media posts. These proxies can be misleading because engagement is disproportionately concentrated among a subset of social media users and is centred on specific types of content that may be unrepresentative of the larger set of content to which people are exposed⁴⁷. We therefore advocate data sharing by social media companies that will allow for (1) better tracking of aggregate exposure to harmful content as well as the extent to which this exposure is concentrated among small groups of people who consume large amounts of false and extremist content, and (2) experiments designed to measure the role of platform features in facilitating exposure to harmful content, especially among heavy consumers. These steps are especially important to take outside the USA and Western Europe in countries that have different media ecosystems (for example, fewer publishers and more censorship), face technical challenges associated with detecting problematic content in languages other than English (especially those that are less common) and/or suffer from a lack of investment by the platforms in limiting extreme content. As a result, the concerns addressed in this

paper may be magnified. By working collaboratively, scientists and platform companies can reduce misunderstandings about the harms of social media and help to identify and respond to the most serious threats around the world.

Misunderstanding social media harms

Overstating exposure to harmful content

We begin by describing four ways in which exposure to potentially harmful false and extremist content on social media tends to be overstated in public discourse. These are summarized in Table 1 and explained in more detail below. As stated above, our focus is exposure to false and inflammatory content on social media, not other potential mechanisms of harm (Table 2).

Table 1 Possible harms from social media

Table 2 Four ways public discourse overstates exposure to potentially harmful content

First, public commentators regularly assume or assert high levels of exposure to potentially harmful content on social media^{21,48}. The tendency to over-emphasize misleading statistics (often with little context) is, of course, not unique to the topic of social media^{11,12}; coverage of science is frequently distorted by media sensationalism¹³ and hype from academic press releases¹⁴. This distortion happens for various reasons. One important mechanism is the loss of nuance as academic work gets translated into the public sphere. Indeed, even when scholars carefully state the scope of their work (for example, refs. ^{49,50}), this nuance is often lost in media coverage (for example, ref. ⁵¹). In the realm of social media, the problem frequently takes the form of a focus on seemingly impressive statistics that fail to take into account the vast scale of content exposure on platforms, the small share of people’s information diets that misinformation and extremist content typically represent, and the way that exposure to such content is

concentrated among small minorities of users^{20,21,22,23,24,34,36,37,52,53,54,55,56,57,58,59,60,61,62,63,64,65,66}. Of course, even small percentages can translate to meaningful quantities on platforms with billions of users, but the patterns we document can lead to systematic misunderstandings of the scale and nature of the problem and thus divert attention from more pressing threats.

The statistics invoked in public debates about social media also often fail to take into account the volume of content that platforms serve. For example, a 2020 *The New York Times* story on a deceptively edited video of Joe Biden noted that it was “viewed more than 17 million times on social media platforms ... [including] hundreds of thousands of views [on Facebook] ... [and] more than 800,000 times [on YouTube]”⁵². Similarly, a recent study of deepfake videos in the wild noted that there were 31 on YouTube with more than 500,000 views⁵³.

These statistics sound large until one considers the scale of the social media platforms in question. On Facebook, for instance, the 20 most widely viewed posts in the USA in the first quarter of 2023 had 776.3 million views on Facebook alone—far more than the Biden video—and yet, in total, represented just 0.04% of views of content on the platform in the USA during the quarter⁵⁴. Facebook likewise reported that content made by Russian trolls from the Internet Research Agency reached as many as 126 million US citizens on Facebook before the 2016 US presidential election—a statistic that was widely cited in the press and in studies on Internet Research Agency operations^{55,56}. Far less attention was paid to the estimate that such content represented 0.004% of the content that US citizens saw in the Facebook news feed⁵⁷. We acknowledge that these figures are huge in absolute terms, but in context, we believe that their effects are likely to be small given that they represent a tiny proportion of total information flows on the platforms⁵⁸. Citing these absolute numbers may contribute to misunderstandings about how much of the content on social media is misinformation^{59,60}: for example, US citizens estimate that 65% of the news they see on social media is misinformation⁶¹.

In addition, although the recent spike in research and coverage focusing on ‘fake news’ and misinformation might seem to suggest that this content makes up a large share of the media diets of US citizens, the reality is quite different when we consider another frequently neglected denominator—the total amount of news that people consume. Previous research suggests that sustained repetition may be required to generate even fleeting media effects and that such effects may be limited when people can choose to opt out of news altogether^{67,68,69}. Competition from other frames can also decrease the salience of the messages people receive and diminish any persuasive effects^{70,71}. For all of these reasons, it is noteworthy that exposure to false, untrustworthy or other forms of potentially harmful online content is actually quite infrequent compared with other news sources. For example, articles from the 490 websites identified as untrustworthy by ref. ⁶² made up only 5.9% of US citizens’ visits to news sites on average in the period before and immediately after the 2016 US election⁶³. Similarly, cross-national data show that untrustworthy websites made up only 0.1–4.4% of web traffic on average across the USA, UK, France and Germany for the 2017–2021 period⁶⁴; untrustworthy sources made up just 6.7% of political URLs seen on Twitter during the 2016 US presidential campaign⁶²; fewer than 10% of YouTube viewers ever saw an extremist channel video in autumn 2020³⁷; and far-left and far-right sources together made up less than 0.5% of total YouTube watch time from 2016 to 2019³⁶. When we expand the denominator to include television in addition to online content, fake news websites represent just 0.1% of US citizens’ media diet⁶⁵. The studies cited here use different methods to identify untrustworthy (or extremist) content. For instance, refs. ^{62,64} used 490 websites that were identified using lists published by fact-checkers as well as a manual inspection of Snopes.com to determine domains that publish questionable claims. Reference ⁶³ relies on NewsGuard’s assessment of the trustworthiness of 3,592 web domains. The papers also differ in the denominator used to measure prevalence. For instance, ref. ⁶³ relies on the hard news classification provided by ref. ⁷², whereas ref. ⁶² uses all URLs included in tweets labelled as being political. These choices can affect prevalence estimations⁷³ but the pattern of results is generally consistent.

A third problem is that statistics on average exposure levels like those described above disregard the important reality that exposure is concentrated among a small fraction of the population. For example, the 20% of US citizens with the most conservative information diets were responsible for 62% of visits to the 490 untrustworthy websites described above during the 2016 campaign⁶³. Similarly, 6.3% of YouTube users were responsible for 79.8% of exposure to extremist channels from July to December 2020³⁷, 85% of vaccine-sceptical content was consumed by less than 1% of US citizens in the 2016–2019 period⁶⁶, and 1% of Twitter users were responsible for 80% of exposures to links from dubious websites during and immediately after the 2016 US presidential campaign⁶². Although these studies draw on different data, they reach similar conclusions. Across numerous data sources, it appears that the typical social media user is exposed to even less dubious or extreme content than the aggregate exposure statistics above might seem to suggest (a pattern that we expect will hold around the world but should be tested in future research). In addition, given how quickly effects on attitudes and beliefs tend to decay^{74,75,76}, such harms are less likely to accumulate and persist for typical news consumers relative to the small minorities of people for whom exposure is more frequent and intense. Finally, many of the statistics that currently inform public debate blur the distinction between exposure to misinformation and engagement with it, often drawing data from ‘leaderboards’ of content with high engagement rates (such as likes, shares and comments). For example, coverage of the highest-engagement content from Facebook pages is often described as showing what is ‘popular’^{77,78,79}. The conflation of engagement with consumption is understandable, as the two sound similar and engagement statistics are easier to access from public sources (for example, CrowdTangle). By contrast, platforms rarely share aggregate statistics about exposure. Engagement is an important metric as it can affect what other people see via algorithmic recommendations, especially for connected nodes in a social graph. However, engagement statistics can provide a biased and often misleading view of the content that people actually consume. Engagement measures generally reflect activity that is public, whereas the vast majority of consumption is private⁴⁷. The decision to publicly engage with content is partly a strategic one that depends on anticipated

audience perception⁸⁰ and, as a result, the content that people publicly engage with is systematically different to the content that they privately consume. For example, publicly shared URLs on Facebook are more likely to be false news than those not publicly shared, according to one recent study in the USA, which found that 7.0% of clicks on URLs that have been publicly shared 100 or more times are to ‘fake news’ websites compared with 2.5% of clicks in representative data⁴⁷. Similarly, researchers studying the spread of misinformation have found that partisans’ decisions about what information to share are affected by their perception of reputational costs and benefits^{81,82}. In other words, whether our goal is to understand exposure to misinformation or belief in it, sharing behaviour is a suboptimal proxy.

Although the studies described above have improved the measurement of important quantities (for example, by focusing on exposure instead of sharing), they still face limitations. Most notably, owing to the difficulty of identifying online misinformation at scale, most studies measuring exposure in behavioural data rely on source-level indicators of trustworthiness or extremity and typically lack data on on-platform exposure, especially in mobile browsers and apps^{34,36,37,44,62,63,64,65}. Even more granular measures of misinformation exposure are necessarily incomplete owing to the capacity limitations of, for example, Meta’s third-party fact-checking partners^{44,45,83}. Use of source-level measures can lead to overestimation of total exposure to false content because only a subset of content published by untrustworthy sites includes misinformation⁸⁴. However, the lack of comprehensive content coverage by fact-checkers can lead to underestimation of total exposure (by failing to identify all of the untrustworthy sites and/or missing specific false articles from trustworthy sites).

Despite these limitations, we believe that the conclusions of the academic research are clear—exposure to misinformation is low as a percentage of people’s information diets and concentrated among a small minority. However, this reality is not reflected in public discourse about social media. The prevalence of this ‘misinformation about misinformation’ can have downstream effects on the steps taken by both the public and the platforms to address the potential harms of social media.

Exaggerating the effects of algorithms

Explanations of exposure to potentially harmful content often focus on algorithms, neglecting the research literature that finds relatively stronger demand effects compared with algorithmic effects on consumption of harmful content^{36,38,43}.

Algorithms are frequently blamed in public discourse for trapping users in online ‘filter bubbles’ and promoting extreme content^{4,85,86}. The reasoning of claims like those in refs. ^{4,85,86} is that algorithmic recommendations seek to promote user engagement; like-minded and/or inflammatory content is more engaging than average; and algorithms therefore differentially promote it to users. It is not surprising that such beliefs have become widespread given that social media algorithms are both opaque and poorly understood by the public^{87,88}.

In reality, the existence of large algorithmic effects on people’s information diets and attitudes has not been established^{89,90}. The most comprehensive study we know of is a randomized large sample of consenting Facebook and Instagram users to a reverse-chronological feed rather than one that was algorithmically ranked⁴⁵. The results on information exposure were mixed: the algorithmic feed showed people more content from politically like-minded sources than the reverse-chronological feed did but less content from untrustworthy sources. Moreover, being switched out of an algorithmically ranked feed for three months had no measurable effect on a variety of political attitudes. Although it is of course possible that a more sustained intervention may have different effects, these results suggest that algorithms typically show people content from accounts they chose to follow or content in which they indicated interest. As a result, exposure levels may reflect people’s preferences more than they shape them³⁸. Similarly, a recent study found that bots trained on real people’s YouTube video view history who followed the site’s algorithmic recommendations viewed less partisan content than the actual humans did⁴³.

By contrast, behavioural data indicates that people who consume a great deal of false, untrustworthy or otherwise potentially harmful content are often already highly attentive to this content and seek it out across mediums³⁶. For example, recent evidence from the deplatforming of Parler, a far-right social media site, in the aftermath of the 6 January 2021 insurrection at the US Capitol found that even this dramatic intervention had no discernible effect on the overall consumption of fringe content, which simply shifted to other, similar sites⁹¹. Audience demand is also more important than algorithmic amplification in driving exposure to fringe content on YouTube among US audiences^{36,37}. For instance, people who consume videos from extremist channels on YouTube in the USA are more likely to have previously expressed high levels of hostile sexism and racial resentment³⁷. Many actively seek out extremist content by following links from alternative and fringe social media sites such as 4chan and/or subscribing to the channel in question³⁷. Similarly, 41% of views of videos classified in previous research as far-right on YouTube took place after people followed a link from an external URL and 36% were directly preceded by another video on the site³⁶. By contrast, only 0.4% of algorithmic recommendations directed users to extremist channel videos on YouTube³⁷. These findings highlight the need for scrutiny of social media features besides algorithms as well as the systemic factors that drive people towards extremism.

Of course, none of these findings demonstrate that algorithmic effects do not, or cannot, exist. Indeed, simulation-based studies demonstrate how social media platforms can recommend problematic content⁹² and controlled experiments suggest algorithmic recommendations can alter the relative prevalence of conservative versus liberal information⁹³, limit exposure to counter-attitudinal news⁹⁴ and have negative attitudinal effects⁹⁵. In addition, methodological challenges limit our ability to disentangle the effects of audience demand from algorithms given the extent to which algorithmic recommendations themselves are shaped by feedback loops^{96,97}.

In short, algorithms can have important effects (both directly and in how they interact with human behaviour), but we argue that (1) the evidence of large-scale algorithmic effects on public attitudes and behaviour is more limited than what is reflected in the

public discourse and (2) the role of audience demand has been neglected in public discourse relative to the attention paid to algorithms.

Causal claims about social media effects

Public discourse frequently blames social media usage or content for negative social trends based on correlational evidence^{2,32}. These kinds of relationships often seem obvious: the increase in social media usage visibly coincides with various shifts over the past 20 years (for example, political polarization), leading many to intuit a causal relationship between them^{2,98,99}. Moreover, the content circulating online inevitably reflects those trends in some manner, creating striking and memorable manifestations of phenomena that people deplore ranging from political incivility to anti-vaccine activism^{100,101,102,103,104}. The public discourse may confidently claim that social media is the primary cause of these trends. However, evidence from social science research paints a more nuanced picture.

Examples of public discourse blaming social media for larger social problems abound. For instance, a 2022 *The Atlantic* article claimed that over the past decade, “Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and a few other large platforms unwittingly dissolved the mortar of trust, belief in institutions, and shared stories that had held a large and diverse secular democracy together”². But this claim reflects a series of correlational relationships. Polarization and social media use have both increased over the past few decades^{98,99}. It is also true that people who use social media more often express higher levels of affective polarization or out-party animosity, especially when they are embedded in networks with high levels of homophily^{31,100,105,106,107}. Such correlations are often taken as strong evidence for a causal relationship, but the best-designed social media deactivation studies so far find that exogenous decreases in Facebook use had no measurable effect on affective polarization in the USA (although issue polarization decreased) and led to less, not more, positive evaluations of outgroup members in Bosnia and Herzegovina^{15,46}. Experiments varying individual features of the platform have also yielded mixed results: although increasing exposure to cross-cutting news

decreased affective polarization⁹⁴, decreasing exposure to content from like-minded sources had no effect⁴⁴. Panel data similarly suggest that the causality goes in the opposite direction— affective polarization predicts media use, not the other way around¹⁰⁸.

Similarly, the *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests) movement in France was described as “a beast born entirely from Facebook” in the press¹⁰¹ based on the way the platform was used to organize protests; and a 2021 *Forbes* article claimed that “[a]nti-vaxxers and the misinformation they spread on social media caused vaccination rates to drop in the US and the UK” owing to the correspondence between social media use and vaccination rates¹⁰². To be sure, the *gilets jaunes* did use Facebook to coordinate their actions and anti-vaccine advocates do use social media to spread misinformation¹⁰⁴. In a very narrow sense, then, these outcomes could not have occurred exactly as they did without the platforms. But the causal question of interest requires consideration of a more difficult counterfactual: whether social media sites like Facebook cause violent protests or anti-vaccine movements to be more severe or prevalent than they would have been in their absence. The answer to this question is unclear. France has a long history of street protests and demonstrations dating back to the French Revolution¹⁰⁹. Likewise, the modern anti-vaccine movement long predates social media, dating back centuries to the advent of vaccines themselves¹¹⁰. As these examples demonstrate, although social media may alter the strategic choices of these actors, its existence is not a necessary condition for them to achieve their goals.

Many influential claims in public discourse about the widespread harms of social media rest on correlational evidence (for example, refs. ^{2,4,86,111}). Although some extant studies leverage plausibly exogenous shocks to generate more credible estimates of the causal impacts of social media or its features (for example, refs. ^{112,113,114}), these opportunities are rare, and thus are the exception rather than the rule. Demonstrating that prominent causal claims about social media harms are true would require new research designs such as experiments in which access to the platform or to specific features of the platform are varied systematically and the results reliably measured. For the same

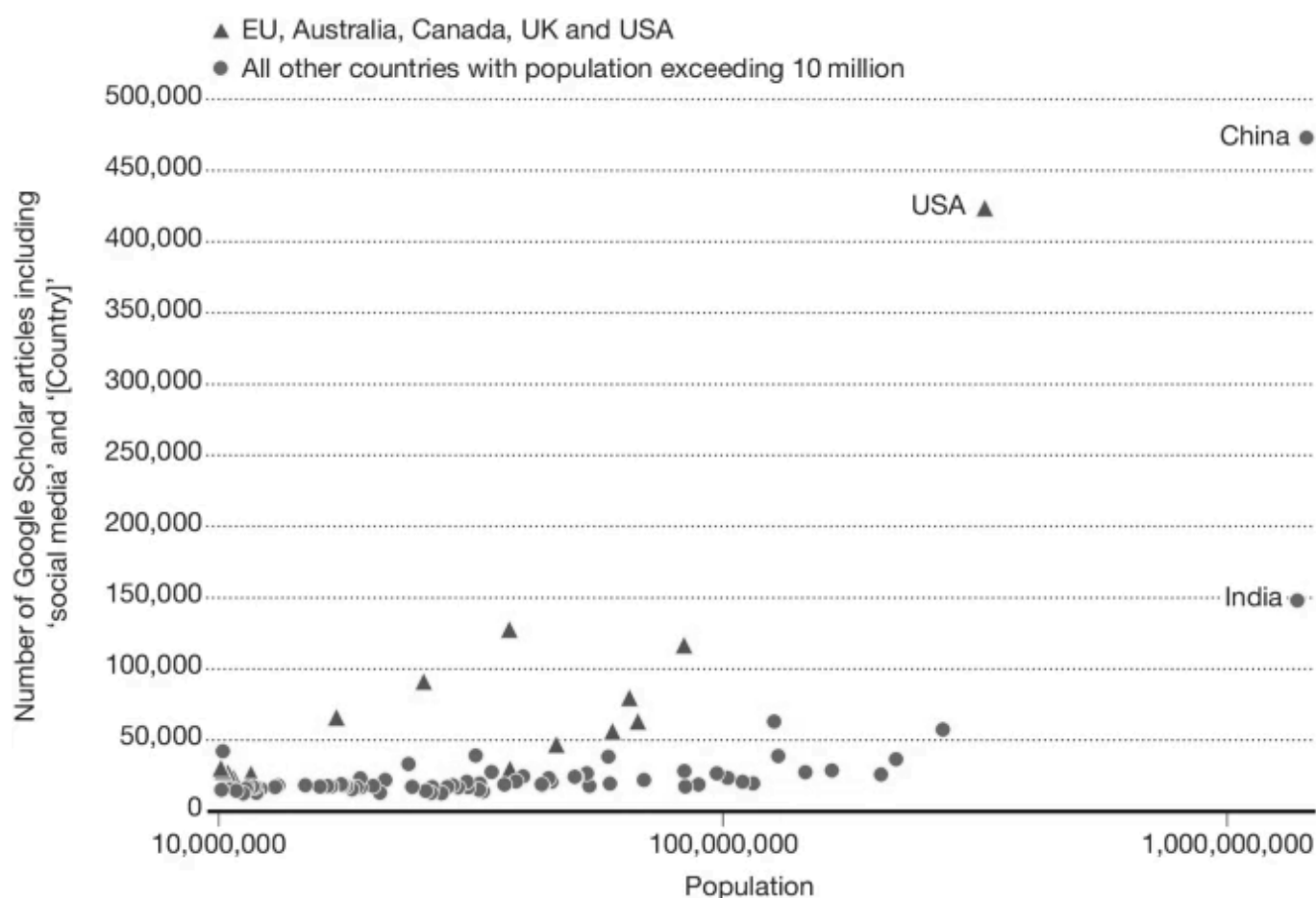
reason, trying to estimate the state of the world absent an entire platform is very difficult; questions about the aggregate effect of social media on society are probably unanswerable (as with, say, television).

None of these inferential challenges mean that social media has no harmful effects. Like any widely used technology, social media platforms are almost certainly responsible for some problems in the world, in part because of their susceptibility to exploitation by bad actors, and should take steps to make positive changes. It is also important to acknowledge the indirect ways in which social media can lead to harms. For instance, the mere availability of misinformation on social media, even if small, could potentially lead to a reduction in public trust, especially when the scale of the problem is exaggerated. If true, however, then it is arguably even more important to correct such misperceptions in public discourse. Similarly, the increasing popularity of social media as a means of news access could theoretically lead to changes in the behaviour of news producers (for example, an increase in sensational or hyper-partisan content). Furthermore, the problems created by social media may have been more severe before the steps taken by platforms such as Facebook (after the 2016 US election) and YouTube (in 2019) to address external criticism. It is, therefore, vital to conduct credible research studies estimating the causal effects of platform features or other interventions on problematic behaviours.

Lack of non-Western data

With a few notable exceptions (for example, refs. ^{115,116}), most research on misinformation focuses on the Global North¹¹⁷. Figure 1 shows how dominant the European Union, Australia, Canada, the UK and the USA are in research about social media versus comparable countries by population. (The key exception is China, which has a different set of social media companies.) As such, our discussion has largely focused on the USA and Western Europe. The limitations of the evidence base unfortunately constrain our ability to provide examples of the issues noted above in other regions. Treating the USA and other Western countries as the default may lead to important and often unacknowledged limitations in research findings.

Fig. 1: Academic research on the use of social media by country.



Google Scholar statistics derived from searches of keywords in academic articles. The following searches were conducted for the 1 January 2018 to 9 June 2022 period: 'social media' and '[Country]'. The figure includes all 91 countries with populations of 10 million or more people. Countries in the European Union, Australia, Canada, the UK and the USA are represented as blue triangles; all other countries with a population exceeding 10 million are represented as red circles.

In particular, although few systematic comparisons have been made, it is plausible that social media's effects may be larger in non-Western contexts. First, misleading online content may reach more people in countries that lack reliable mainstream news outlets, put limitations on media freedom and/or have low levels of trust in the media^{118,119}. Social media moderation decisions can also be influenced by such regimes, further exacerbating the problem¹²⁰, and expert surveys indicate that government

disinformation has grown differentially in autocratizing countries versus democratized ones¹²¹. In addition, the subsidized access provided by Facebook's 'free basics' plan may also increase the prevalence of social media content in users' information diets by limiting exposure to other sources of news^{122,123}. Platforms also devote fewer resources to content moderation in the Global South. In 2020, for instance, just 13% of the 3.2 million hours Facebook spent searching out, labelling and taking down false or misleading content was outside the USA¹²³. Facebook offers its services in 110 languages but had people reviewing content in just 70 languages and has published its 'community standards' in just 50 as of 2021¹²⁴. Technological approaches to detecting various types of potentially harmful content, such as natural language processing, are also likely to perform less well in low-resource languages¹²⁵.

As a result, we expect higher levels of false and extremist content in people's information diets outside of the USA and Western Europe. In these contexts, it seems that the platforms make less of an effort to limit and tag potentially harmful content, act less aggressively to counter bad actors and use algorithms that are likely to perform worse due to language differences. The risks of harms are thus concomitantly greater; platform companies can and should increase their efforts to minimize harm in non-Western contexts (although the concerns we raise about counterfactual inference still apply).

Discussion

Our review of research on the harms of online misinformation leads us to conclude that exposure to misinformation and extremist content is not frequent; instead, it is relatively rare and highly concentrated among small groups of extremists. We argue that the many claims to the contrary neglect appropriate denominators, are skewed by high levels of exposure in fringe groups or reflect engagement rather than exposure. In addition, the debate about exposure to potentially harmful content on social media overstates the role of algorithms, neglecting the powerful role of audience demand. Finally, we suggest that public discourse too often asserts causal associations between social media content or exposure and outcomes such as polarization without providing

or citing credible evidence of such a relationship. We note, however, that the evidence base is limited and heavily concentrated in the USA and Western Europe—far more research must be conducted in the rest of the world, where there is often greater reason for concern.

Our conclusions have important policy implications for researchers, platforms and civil society (Box 1) First, we should focus more attention on measuring exposure to potentially harmful content in the tails of the distribution and among extremist or fringe groups. Previous research provides worrying evidence linking social media to hate crimes^{126,127} and civil unrest¹⁰³. Without better data on misinformation exposure among fringe and extremist groups, designing effective interventions to prevent such effects or holding platforms accountable for failing to do so is impossible. Second, we need to determine how to most effectively limit demand for false and extremist content and the amplification of it by political elites and journalists, who often spread viral falsehoods to far larger audiences than the ones they reach directly online. Traditional news, and in particular television news, still dominates people’s news consumption⁶⁵ and political elites seek to shape that news coverage¹²⁸. As a result, the mainstream media are a key mechanism for exposing broad audiences to false claims, which often originate with political elites. This exposure can have harmful effects (for example, refs. ^{129,130}). Both scholarly research and civil society should thus recognize the critical role of elites and traditional news media in spreading misinformation. Platforms need to likewise determine how to prevent misinformation from those sources from spreading more effectively¹³¹. Social media companies must also expand researcher access to platform data and application programming interfaces (APIs) and enable academic–industry collaborations on field experiments that enable assessment of the harms resulting from misinformation on their platforms.

We recognize that greater transparency and data disclosure raises privacy concerns and requires difficult trade-offs^{132,133}. However, such concerns must be balanced against the societal need to identify and mitigate platform harms. We are confident that the combination of privacy-protecting approaches to sharing aggregate data and secure

data access facilities can manage these risks and address key stakeholder concerns appropriately^{132,134}. When possible, independent non-profit organizations and government agencies should help to facilitate data access and researcher partnerships, providing protections to scholars and creating more equitable terms of access. Legislative proposals in the USA (for example, the Platform Accountability and Transparency Act and Social Media Data Act) and existing laws in Europe (for example, article 31 of the Digital Services Act) include provisions for social media data access by researchers. These proposals, as varied as they are, also demonstrate that a balance can be struck between the need to protect user data and the need for research on social media effects (that is, by enforcing restrictions on who gets access to what types of data and for which types of research goal)¹³⁵. In addition, transparency mechanisms such as preregistration can help to promote trust in the resulting research by reducing the ability of platforms to influence what results are reported. Finally, it is critically important to expand research and monitoring into online misinformation outside the USA and Western Europe. Although platforms and the scientific community claim to serve the world, both research^{136,137,138,139,140} and platforms^{141,142,143,144} have always distributed resources inequitably. Increased investment in content moderation and misinformation research in non-Western contexts could help to offset historical inequalities in the digital world and reduce the threat where the potential harms are greatest^{145,146}.

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Ethics declarations

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests, but provide the following information in the interests of transparency and full disclosure. C.B. and D.J.W. previously worked for Microsoft Research and D.M.R. currently works for Microsoft Research. B.N. has received grant funding from Meta. B.N. and E.T. are participants in the US 2020 Facebook and Instagram Election Study as independent academic researchers. D.J.W. has received funding from Google Research. D.M.R. and D.J.W. both previously worked at Yahoo!.

Peer review

Peer review information

Nature thanks Stephan Lewandowsky, David Rand, Emma Spiro and the other, anonymous, reviewer(s) for their contribution to the peer review of this work.

Additional information

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About this article

Cite this article

Budak, C., Nyhan, B., Rothschild, D.M. *et al.* Misunderstanding the harms of online misinformation. *Nature* **630**, 45–53 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-024-07417-w>

Received

13 October 2021

Accepted

11 April 2024

Published

05 June 2024

Issue Date

06 June 2024

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-024-07417-w>

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Nature (*Nature*) | ISSN 1476-4687 (online) | ISSN 0028-0836 (print)