DEMOS

Submission on opportunities, challenges and threats to media in the digital age: gendered disinformation

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WHO WE ARE

1. Demos is Britain's leading cross-party think tank, with a 25-year history of high quality research, policy innovation and thought leadership. Our priority is to bring ordinary citizens' voices into policy making.

2. CASM, Demos' dedicated digital research hub has unique insights and expertise across tech policy and its impact on our society, economy and democracy. CASM has spent the last seven years developing methods and technology to undertake policy-focussed research on social media, and other online platforms on which public conversation is taking place. CASM is also the home of the Good Web Project, a joint project with the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, the Alliance for Securing Democracy and Arena at Johns Hopkins University, to empower the UK and international governments to ensure the future of the internet is compatible with liberal democracy. It seeks to measure and build public support for an internet that resists the authoritarian alternative, and empower policymakers to fight for this cause.

3. Our research has long included trying to understand the nature of online harms, in particular, how disinformation and violence threaten the integrity of the information ecosystem. We have pioneered investigations into state-aligned gendered disinformation (SAGD) specifically, developing a methodology for identifying key features of these campaigns with the National Democratic Institute, looking into SAGD in Poland and the Philippines. We have also partnered with the Heinrich Boell Institute in Brussels to examine policy approaches to gendered disinformation in a series of articles and briefings.

4. We have extensive experience in researching disinformation and in computational analysis of media content and social media data. Other recent related work includes investigating gendered abuse of reality TV contestants online for BBC Panorama; an investigation of state disinformation campaigns in Warring Songs: Information Operations in the Digital Age and an analysis of New Frontiers: The 2019 Mozambique Elections on Social Media.

Question: What are the key trends, threats or challenges to the freedom, independence, pluralism and diversity of media and the safety of journalists in your country, region, or globally in your view?

5. Gendered disinformation is a key threat to the freedom, independence and safety of journalists globally.

6. Disinformation is widely understood to threaten and destabilise the quality of public discourse and information, and a robust, free press is central to combating the proliferation of disinformation. However, gendered disinformation not only plays a similar disruptive role, but is weaponised against individual journalists, targeting them for abuse specifically in order to undermine them and their reporting. It thus poses an existential threat to the very journalism which is central to tackling it.

7. [Gendered disinformation](#) is manipulated information that weaponises gendered stereotypes for political, economic or social ends. Gendered disinformation is commonly used against women journalists, invoking gendered narratives about their work, their character, their sexuality and their appearance. This aims to discredit and discourage women's journalism when their reporting critiques or threatens the interests of those in power; and seeks to exclude women from participating in journalism.

8. Campaigns are used against women journalists to discredit their credibility through gendered attacks against their character; to intimidate and silence them by facilitating and encouraging online harassment; or to try to justify violence against them by portraying them as a threat to society or morality.

9. Gendered disinformation campaigns can originate from state actors or non-state actors. State-based disinformation campaigns - which are directly coordinated by state actors - are linked to state-aligned disinformation campaigns, which can also include in[formal networks of actors](#) who are not paid or coordinated but who contribute to disinformation campaigns as their interests are aligned.

10. State-aligned disinformation campaigns are a particular concern for the safety of journalists and freedom of the press. States are able to compound disinformation campaigns on social media through indirect or direct control of mainstream media narratives. State actors also hold significant power to [pressure digital platforms](#) *not* to act in response to disinformation campaigns.

11. Since states hold significant powers through which violence can be [perpetrated against journalists](#), disinformation campaigns justifying persecution or violence are a serious threat. Moreover, international calls for action to be taken against gendered disinformation are difficult to translate to action when those campaigns are conducted, supported or condoned by a state.

12. These campaigns threaten media freedom and the safety of journalists in the following ways:

Purpose of disinformation campaign	Who does the disinformation campaign aim to reach?	Methods	Risk of impact of campaign	Examples
Discredit journalist(s)' reporting	Wider public	Attack them as being stupid, liars, devious, or degrading their character or appearance	Independent media is seen as biased or corrupt and has freedoms and reach limited	Women journalists investigating disinformation targeted with abuse and conspiracy theories Harassment through claims of women journalists having had plastic surgery Women journalists are often attacked as 'presstitutes'
Silence their reporting	Individual journalist(s)	Ongoing harassment, death threats, threats of sexual violence, doxxing, sharing of real or faked intimate images, pile-on abuse attacks	Journalists change their reporting, have to cut themselves off from a wide audience, or leave the profession	Women journalists in Pakistan faced doxxing and abuse after criticising the ruling party
Justify oppression or violence against journalist(s)	Wider public	Attack their character or reporting as dangerous, immoral, corrupt, disinformation or 'fake news'	Persecution of journalists seen as acceptable; observers may take it as a licence to commit violence against journalist(s)	Gendered disinformation campaigns have been used against journalists like Maria Ressa, who has faced multiple investigations and charges following her ongoing criticism of the government.
Discourage others from participating in public discourse	Onlookers e.g. women who are in or might go into journalism	Harassment campaigns against supporters of journalists; public abuse of journalists and attacks on their safety and privacy	Others feel that it is too dangerous for them to participate in journalism or participate in the public sphere	Women journalists killed in Afghanistan, meaning TV stations unable to hire women over security fears - journalists being targeted for 'challenging perceived social norms'

Question: To what extent have these trends, threats and challenges emerged, or have been aggravated, because of the policies and practices of digital and social media platforms?

13. Gendered disinformation is not a new phenomenon - it sits at the intersection of propaganda and gender-based violence, and is not *caused* by online platforms or digital communication.

14. However, digital platforms are an essential part of an ecosystem that allows gendered disinformation to spread and be amplified, scaling its impact, and making it a far more effective tool of propaganda and violence. The fact that social media platforms have also become crucial spaces for journalism multiplies the threat as these have become spaces that journalists need to access safely to be able to work.

15. Policies of digital platforms: platform policies often prohibit content that includes content often used in gendered disinformation campaigns - such as bullying, abuse or harassment. However, these policies are inconsistently and not transparently enforced, with little action taken against perpetrators. Moderation practices also are unable to evolve quickly enough: gendered disinformation campaigns exhibit '[malign creativity](#)', and can respond quickly to changes in moderation rules so as to continue to fall on the 'permitted' side of moderation.

16. Gendered disinformation is extremely context-dependent - individual pieces of content making up a campaign can [disguise themselves](#) as legitimate political critique, or even as counterspeech against violence against women, and can easily avoid using terms such as gendered slurs. All of these features mean it is more easily overlooked by automated moderation or by moderators who are not adequately experienced, resourced or supported to be able to identify gendered disinformation across a variety of contexts and languages.

17. Hence although robust policies and greater investment in moderation are needed, we need to look also to the design and structure of digital platforms.

18. The conditions which allow gendered disinformation to proliferate online are not simply what kinds of content are permitted or not. Platforms are designed with user engagement in mind, regardless of what they are engaging with, for frictionless interaction and effective monetisation. The ways that platforms are designed - from the functionalities of communication they permit, to the powers they give users, to the social norms that they seek to create, to the algorithmic systems used to curate, recommend or moderate content - all affect the risk and likelihood that gendered disinformation campaigns will be successful.

19. For instance, pile-on harassment campaigns are easily orchestrated, as within a model based on engagement, once enough users engage, other users will be shown the campaign and so are more likely to participate - particularly if content or engagement is monetisable.

20. Tackling gendered disinformation is often approached through methods used to tackle individual cases of gender-based violence online, and to tackle disinformation online. These are not sufficient to reduce the risks of gendered disinformation.

21. Solutions to gendered disinformation as a form of online violence too often put the burden onto individual women journalists to keep themselves safe after they have been targeted in a campaign, rather than tackling the risk factors and systemic causes that lead to the campaigns themselves. Platforms' solutions to gendered disinformation, for instance, rely on individuals reporting abuse against them - and even then often take no action.

22. Solutions which aim to tackle gendered disinformation as a form of disinformation, however, also risk missing the mark. Disinformation is often treated as a problem of 'poor information', that can be remedied by fact-checking or promoting authoritative information.

23. However, gendered disinformation campaigns in particular, rely on manipulating existing social values and prejudices to achieve their aims, not only on false claims. They use manipulated or inauthentically amplified information which reinforces and inflames existing prejudices, social divisions, and negative attitudes towards women in the public sphere. Emotive content, value-judgements, memes, or unverifiable rumours are common occurrences, none of which are defused by interventions which promote 'more accurate' information. (Moreover, fact-checking has been used as [an instrument of harassment](#) of women journalists within gendered disinformation campaigns). Specific action to tackle the threats caused by gendered disinformation is thus needed.

24. Meaningful platform action on gendered disinformation is unlikely without regulation. Regulation which focuses on regulating what content is permitted online or not is unlikely to address the risks caused by gendered disinformation - gendered disinformation is often legal speech, and seeking to criminalise it would likely lead to criminalisation of political speech that would undermine rather than protect journalists. Regulation is more likely to be effective where it focuses on regulating the design, structure, systems and policies platforms have for dealing with these threats. (More detailed exploration of how the [UK](#), [US](#) and [EU](#) may deal with this threat can be found here).

25. However, in countries where state-aligned gendered disinformation is a particular threat to journalists, any regulation by the state of digital platforms is not going to seek to reduce the incidence of such campaigns. Some states may seek to [stop platforms](#) from moderating

content at all when it is legal, while others use concepts like 'stopping disinformation' as a grounds for censoring content.

26. Gendered disinformation requires a genuine multistakeholder approach which is focused on prevention rather than only on response. Central to this should be the involvement of civil society and local media, who are able to raise early warnings about gendered disinformation campaigns which may be triggered or are beginning to evolve. Digital platforms should engage in much more proactive design testing and changing to reduce the risks of gendered disinformation spreading, and respond more consistently to reports of abuse, through investing more in moderation based on expertise in local contexts. Governments and international institutions should support these efforts and facilitate early warning systems to identify and tackle emerging risks of violence, as well as compelling platforms to act to promote and protect human rights.

27. A full manifesto of policy actions to reduce the risk for gendered disinformation can be found here.

28. For more information, we recommend these resources:

Amplified Abuse: Report on Online Violence Against Women in the 2021 Uganda General
The Chilling: global trends in online violence against women journalists, Posetti et al., UNESCO, 2021Election, Kakande et al., Pollicy, 2021
Engendering Hate: The Contours of State Aligned Gendered Disinformation Online, Judson et al., Demos, 2020
Exploring the concept of gendered disinformation, IGF BPF Gender and Digital Rights, 2021
Fake news, real women: disinformation gone macho, Occeñola,Rappler, 2018
Gender-Based Disinformation, advancing our understanding and response, EUDisinfoLab, 2021
Gendered Disinformation: 6 reasons why liberal democracies need to respond to this threat, Judson, Demos, 2021
Gendered disinformation is a national security problem, Di Meco and Wilfore, Brookings, 2021
How authoritarians use gender as a weapon, Thornton, Washington Post, 2021
How Disinformation became a new threat to women, Coda, Jankowicz, 2017
Malign Creativity: How gender, sex and lies are weaponised against women online, Jankowicz et al., Wilson Center, 2021
Misogyny and Misinformation: An analysis of gendered disinformation tactics during the COVID-19 pandemic, Sessa, EUDisinfoLab, 2020