The Big Grift

How Toxic Business Models Fuel the Disinformation Crisis
Figure 5. An inflatable halftrack
The Problem with Fake News

We all have a sense of what we mean by “Disinformation.” But we fall down when we try to define it.

Truth or falsehood cannot be the criteria. Otherwise, we’d ban any mention of Santa Claus on the internet. Other binary definitions — good or bad, left or right — raise similar issues and are quagmires of risks to free speech and political freedom.

This is one of the big reasons why combatting disinformation in our open society is so difficult.
Narrative: The How

Narratives are stories we tell ourselves to understand the world around us.

In an increasingly complex world, where we are overwhelmed with information, we rely more and more on simple narratives to cope.

Narratives can be aspirational - they can inspire positive emotions such as hope and altruism. Or they can be toxic, inspiring fear, conflict, or even violence.

An effective narrative is:
- Clear
- Unique
- Emotionally & Intellectually Resonant
- Easily Shared

TV Commercials are great examples of narrative vignettes.
Adversarial Narratives

Adversarial narratives are toxic narratives that intentionally pit two or more parties against each other or their own interests. **Adversarial narratives can carry the risk of harm to an individual or a group.**

Defining disinformation as adversarial narrative conflict is the key to understanding — and combating — while avoiding the quagmires of free speech, truth/falsehood dichotomies, and traditional politics.

Modern adversarial narrative conflict — or narrative warfare more generally — is distributed across our massively complex and diverse information environment.
Narrative Elements

Narrative elements can take many forms across our diverse information environment.

Shareability and emotional resonance are key, and are programmatical rewarded by attention-driven platforms. This is what is new, and why the problem seems so much worse than at other times in history.
What’s Different?
What’s Different?
What’s Different?

HOOKED
How to Build Habit-Forming Products
NIR EYAL
WITH RYAN HOOVER
The Disinformation Threat Spectrum

- State Actors
- Private Influence Operators
- Grassroots Trolls
- Pure Rent Seekers

Centralised vs. Decentralised
Political vs. Financial
The Big Grift

Someone is always making money off of disinformation.
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Someone is always making money off of disinformation.
The Global Disinformation Index

We aim to catalyze industry to reduce disinformation and its harms.

**DISINFORMATION INDEX**
A neutral, independent, transparent index of domains’ risk of disinforming their readers, using cutting edge AI combined with careful analyses of journalistic integrity, serving advertisers, the ad tech industry and platforms.

**INTELLIGENCE HUB**
A neutral, independent, non-profit hub performing cross-platform OSINT tracking disinformation and extremism online, serving a broad array of online platforms and the media.

**POLICY INSIGHTS**
An independent, pragmatic policy organization that provides content moderation standards and policy rubrics for harms-based disinformation intervention policies to platforms and governments.
GDI’s Data Platform
Programmatic Ads

- In 2019, we estimated that disinformation generated at least $235 million annually.

- Google placed at least 70% of the ads on the ~2,000 sites we included in the study.

- Just three companies – Google, Xandr, and Criteo – placed ads worth over $200 million in a year.

- Most of Criteo’s contribution was from ads placed on a single site: RT.com.

- 500 sites that traffic on COVID-19 disinformation generate upwards of $25 million annually.

- 200 sites trafficking in US election disinformation were generating at least $1M per month between November 2020 and January 2021.
Bankrolling Bigotry

• We analyzed the digital footprints of 73 US-based groups and identified 54 online fundraising mechanisms, which included 47 platforms, 5 different cryptocurrencies and the presence of membership or consulting services, ultimately finding 191 instances of hate groups using online fundraising services to support their activity.

• Most (62%) of the platforms have explicit policies against hate speech despite their use by hate groups. These groups already violate those existing policies.

• 44% of the hate groups in our study have 501(c)(3) or 501(c)(4) tax exempt status in the US.

• The platform most commonly used by the hate groups studied was Charity Navigator.
What Can We Do? \_-(ツ)_/\n
• The degradation of the world’s information environment is the result of toxic business models. These must change.

• This will be hard. It will require acts of Congress. The entire economy will be affected.

• We must do this. Unless we reform effectively in at least three key areas – antitrust, privacy, and platform liability – these business models will eat reality as we know it.

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The Good News

• Just by talking about this, we are helping to solve the problem. Awareness is a good inoculation.

• Changes are starting to happen. Platforms are stepping up their efforts.

• There is low hanging fruit. Most of these activities already violate either platform or government policies. **Enforce those policies!**

**THANK YOU!**