

# People Expect Joint Accountability for Online Misinformation

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## Abstract

Identifying who should take responsibility for online misinformation is critical for mitigating its detrimental effects on society. This research offers a multi-faceted picture of the public’s perception on who is responsible for false information online separately for 1) creating, 2) disseminating, and 3) failing to prevent it. Our study ( $N=496$ ) shows that the responsible entities differ across distinct aspects of online misinformation. For instance, people and interest groups are associated with creating falsehoods, whereas social media platforms are predominantly seen as accountable for failing to prevent them. We discuss several implications, including the public demand for accountable social and news platforms and the importance of joint accountability in the fight against online misinformation.

## 1 Introduction

Who should be blamed for creating and disseminating misinformation online or failing to prevent falsehoods from reaching a wide audience? While much research has been devoted to understanding how misinformation travels (Vosoughi et al., 2018; Kwon et al., 2013; Shao et al., 2018), the question of whom the general public views as the main actors in its creation, dissemination, and prevention remains open. Answering this question is imperative to designing policies and interventions that can combat misinformation, such as regulation (Cha et al., 2020) and online interventions (Pennycook et al., 2021).

Scholars, news reporters, and other stakeholders often discuss whom to blame for the uncontrolled spread of misinformation online and thus should take the lead in the fight against it. Following the influence of social media in the 2016 US election, news media quickly turned to social media platforms, particularly Facebook, for accountability (The Atlantic, 2017). Following the election,

Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook’s CEO, defended the platform’s stance in not taking a proactive role in content moderation by stating that Facebook did not wish to be “arbiters of truth” (The Walt Street Journal, 2016).

After widespread backlash from the public and mainstream media, social media platforms decided to take a more active role in the 2020 US election by flagging misleading posts and removing false conspiracy theories (The New York Times, 2020). Nevertheless, some argue these efforts are not enough to “save democracy” (The Washington Post, 2020b).

Another perspective has instead underscored journalists’ and news institutions’ role in disseminating misinformation. First, mainstream media might contribute to the dissemination of falsehoods through their debunking efforts, although not intentionally as other nefarious actors (Tsfati et al., 2020). People might be exposed to false information due to mainstream media unnecessarily correcting falsehoods that would otherwise only reach a small number of citizens.

Second, journalists might disseminate misinformation due to media manipulation. Interest groups, such as conspiracy theorists and trolls, have developed techniques to increase their visibility by targeting news media sources to disseminate their content (Donovan and Friedberg, 2019; Marwick and Lewis, 2017). For instance, these groups can coordinate actions that force specific topics into the public discourse that journalists may not be able to ignore. Journalists are aware of such propaganda; however, they report barriers in delivering accurate information, such as technical difficulties in obtaining data from social media and the power relations between them and online platforms (McClure Haughey et al., 2020; Balod and Hameleers, 2019).

Instead of focusing on a specific actor’s re-

sponsibility, Graves and Wells (2019) have argued that political elites, news media, and citizens all have their roles in establishing “factual accountability” through a collaborative effort. Public discourse should not be limited to specific entities that are expected to prevent misinformation online. Rather, it should embrace a joint responsibility undertaking in which various actors are held jointly accountable for online information.

These normative approaches to responsibility often neglect how online users, and more generally the general public, perceive all stakeholders’ roles in the spread of misinformation. Descriptive analyses of this question have been limited. A 2016 Pew Research Center study found that US adults considered the general public, politicians, and social media platforms similarly responsible for not preventing fake news from gaining attention (Barthel et al., 2016). In contrast, a later study from 2018 indicated that although politicians and activist groups are blamed for creating false claims, news media platforms are expected to take the lead in reducing the spread of falsehoods (Mitchell et al., 2019). Albeit helpful, these results are hard to compare as a whole. Our study inquired who is to blame for online misinformation with respect to its creation, dissemination, and the failure for prevention—this multi-faceted view of misinformation has not been studied systematically.

## 2 Methods

We conducted an online survey to answer this question. After agreeing to the research terms, participants were shown a short definition of online misinformation. Participants were then asked whom they consider responsible for the three aforementioned aspects of online misinformation: creation, dissemination, and prevention. The study ended with a set of demographic questions.

### 2.1 Respondents

We recruited 500 participants through Prolific during May 3rd-4th, 2021. Prolific is a crowdsourcing platform for recruiting subjects for social and economic experiments (Palan and Schitter, 2018). Our study was restricted to US residents who had previously completed at least 100 tasks with a minimum approval rate of 95%. Respondents were compensated US\$1.43 for their participation. Four participants were removed for fail-

ing a simple attention check question that had instructed them to choose a specific answer. The final dataset analyzed was composed of 496 respondents. Women comprised 38.7% of the sample, and nearly half of participants were younger than 35 years old (51.8%;  $M=37.0$ ,  $SD=12.4$ ). A majority of respondents had received a Bachelor’s degree (63.7%) and identified themselves as Caucasian (63.7%). African Americans represented 14.9%, whereas Asians and Hispanics comprised 12.9% and 5.2%, respectively. Participants were Democrats (41.3%) or Republicans (32.7%).

### 2.2 Measures

Participants were asked which entities they found responsible for 1) creating, 2) disseminating, and 3) not preventing the dissemination of false information online. They were shown a list of entities: the general public, social media users, social media companies, people with vested interests (i.e., interest groups), conspiracy theorists, news media, politicians, national institutions (that showed the government and the FCC as examples), and foreign institutions (showing foreign governments and actors). This list was compiled from a pilot study we do not report in this paper. Each participant chose as many entities as they wished for each aspect of online misinformation. Participants were also allowed to write down any other responsible entity in free text form. Each aspect was presented separately and in random order; entities’ presentation order was randomized between subjects.

## 3 Results

We employed chi-square tests to identify whether participants held different actors responsible for distinct aspects of online misinformation. Participants’ attribution of responsibility differed between creation, dissemination, and prevention ( $\chi^2(16)=338.53$ ,  $p<.001$ , Cramer’s  $V=0.16$ ; see Figure 1). Social media users, conspiracy theorists, and interest groups were deemed the most responsible for creating online misinformation, followed by politicians and news media outlets. Foreign institutions and the general public came next and were followed by social media platforms as actors moderately responsible for creating false claims. Local institutions were not perceived to play a major role in the creation of false information online.

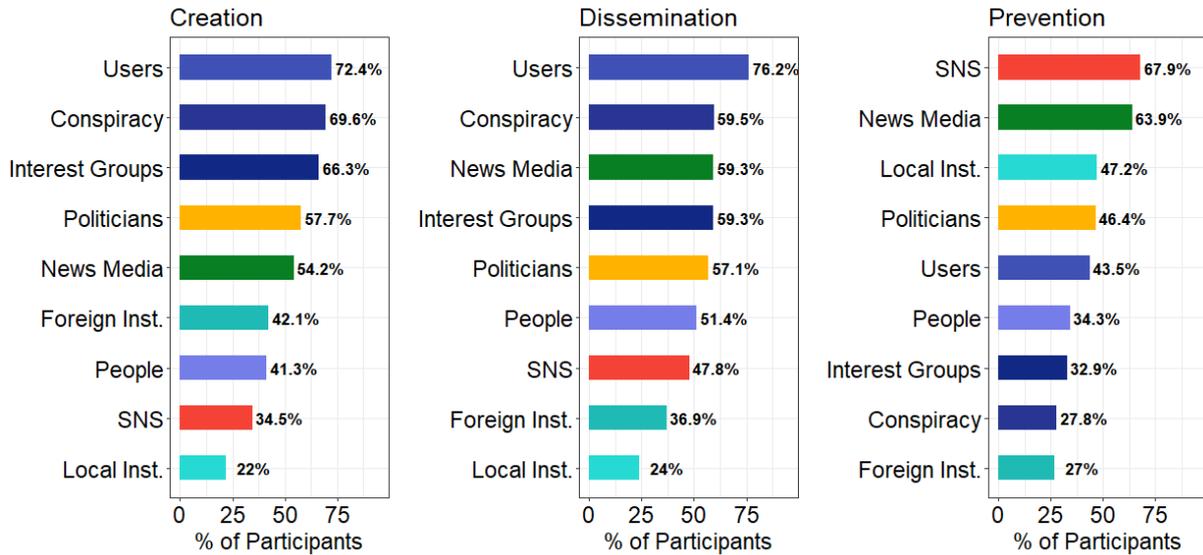


Figure 1: “Which party or whom do you find responsible for creating, disseminating, and not preventing the dissemination of false information?” The percentage of participants who picked each entity to the question of who is responsible for creating (top), disseminating (middle), and not preventing (bottom) misinformation online. Participants were shown all entities in random order and could select as many as they wished.

Social media users were the actors most blamed for disseminating false information. A series of entities were deemed moderately responsible, indicating a more homogeneous distribution of blame. People and social media platforms were deemed moderately responsible, followed by foreign and local institutions.

Social media platforms and news media outlets were perceived as the actors most responsible for the failure to prevent misinformation. Local institutions, social media users, and politicians were blamed to a moderate level. People, interest groups, conspiracy theorists, and foreign institutions were deemed the least responsible actors concerning prevention.

Only 28 out of 496 (5.64%) participants provided any responses in free text. Most referred to politics-related actors (e.g., “Liberals,” “Republicans”) as if participants meant to highlight which side of the political spectrum they blamed. However, we did not observe any substantial difference in the entities held responsible across political partisanship ( $p$ -values for all  $\chi^2$ -tests greater than .05, Cramer’s  $V$  smaller than 0.06). This finding suggests that people blame the same entities (e.g., news media) but may focus on those they disagree with politically.

Our data showed that people blame different entities for distinct aspects of online misinformation. Social media users and those with vested inter-

ests in creating misinformation were blamed the most for creating falsehoods, followed by politicians and news media outlets. These same actors were also deemed homogeneously responsible for the dissemination of misinformation. In contrast, social media platforms and news media outlets were expected to prevent false information already out there, followed by local governments, politicians, and users. We discuss the implications of these findings below.

## 4 Implications

### 4.1 Public Demand for Accountability

Social media platforms have been widely accused of spreading misinformation online (The Atlantic, 2017; The Washington Post, 2020a). Our results concerning prevention concur with this perspective. Current social media platforms’ efforts addressing political misinformation during and following the 2020 US election (The New York Times, 2020; CNN, 2020) agree with this stance. Nevertheless, we highlight that similar efforts should be extended to other countries (e.g., Brazil (New York Times, 2018), the EU (BBC, 2019a)) and events (e.g., the COVID-19 vaccine rollout (The Washington Post, 2019)).

Another important public demand for accountability was directed at news media. News organizations were highly blamed for creating, dissemi-

nating, and failing to prevent misinformation, indicating that although news media express their aversion to it and often blame social media platforms, people have a different perspective. Hence, news media outlets should be aware of their expected role in all aspects of misinformation to mitigate its ill effects.

#### 4.2 Government's Non-Partisanship Role

Participants believed local governments should rise to the challenge and work towards preventing online misinformation. Hence, regulation targeting misinformation could be perceived as beneficial by the public, particularly if it leads to accountability for social media platforms and news media, as discussed above. Participants also moderately blamed foreign actors for creating and disseminating misinformation. This could have been caused by the participants' context as foreign interference with US democratic institutions has been widely reported in recent years ([The New York Times, 2021](#)). Nevertheless, we highlight that international collaborations to combat and prevent falsehoods are important, as online misinformation is a global problem that does not respect territorial boundaries.

#### 4.3 Fighting Interest Groups

Participants deemed interest groups responsible for creating and disseminating misinformation online. Unfortunately, this public expectation goes against existing cases where interest groups were found to play crucial roles and were not held accountable. For instance, various reports indicate Macedonia youth's role in creating and spreading political falsehoods during the 2016 US election ([BBC, 2019b](#)); those who took part in it justified their actions with financial reasons.

Financial motivations may be an important driver of misinformation. Misinformation should thus be fought against at its financial core. One may envision reforming Ad-based revenue models. Those who create and disseminate misinformation can substantially profit through Ad-based revenue models ([Funke et al., 2019](#); [Braun and Eklund, 2019](#)). These paradigms should not promote false information but foster trustworthy news sources better. Similar efforts addressing misinformation's financial components could be crucial to mitigating intentional online misinformation.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

### 5.1 Expectation of Joint Responsibility

The findings in this paper shed light on how misinformation can be dealt with in an online environment. One of the key findings is that participants held different actors responsible for distinct aspects of online misinformation, highlighting that any intervention to address or regulate it should be crafted with specific actors and objectives in mind. For instance, addressing only certain aspects of it, e.g., by regulating social media platforms, might help prevent misinformation but not weaken its creation. Focusing on specific entities might not holistically deal with the complex issue of online misinformation.

It is worth noting that no entity was deemed solely responsible for the holistic problem of online misinformation, i.e., participants did not single out an individual or organization that should be held to account. This trend is particularly prominent when considering misinformation dissemination, supporting the view of Graves and Wells in their proposal of "factual accountability" ([Graves and Wells, 2019](#)). Instead of relying on specific entities for preventing the spread and creation of falsehoods, our work emphasizes that all actors involved have their roles in this fight—a form of joint accountability:

1. Users should become aware of their role in creating, disseminating, debunking, and preventing false information from being shared online. Online interventions could play a crucial role in circumventing any psychological factors that influence users' online behaviors ([Pennycook et al., 2021](#)).
2. Social media platforms should be able to take the role of fighting misinformation through both algorithmic and manual methods. Platforms could implement rapidly accessible interventions to prevent users from sharing misinformation ([Epstein et al., 2021](#)).
3. News media outlets, regardless of their political orientation, should comprehend their role in spreading both accurate and false information and promoting the former.
4. Political actors and organizations should invest in regulation to combat misinformation at its core through international collaborations.

## 5.2 Limitations and Future Work

Even though we have differentiated responsibility attribution across multiple aspects of online misinformation, we did not obtain respondents' attribution of specific roles and their relationships between entities. For instance, respondents might hold governments responsible for preventing misinformation through social media platforms' regulation, but not through restrictions to users' freedom of speech. Future work should delve deeper into these questions via structured interviews where research can address these questions in depth.

How and whether the public opinion should be embedded in future interventions and strategies to combat misinformation is an open question. Following the public opinion on this topic might prove to be difficult or even unproductive. Future discussions should consider descriptive research, such as ours, while weighting feasibility, practicality, and many other factors. Our studies' samples are also restricted to the US. Future research should be expanded to different communities, many of which have already suffered from misinformation (e.g., South America ([New York Times](#), 2018) and Asia ([Cha et al.](#), 2020)).

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