

MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF SPREADING FALSE RUMORS ON SOCIAL NETWORKS¹

ABSTRACT

New technologies allow users to spread ideas to a broad audience easily and quickly. They affect the way ideas are interpreted and the credibility ascribed to them. Popular social networks make it easy to share content. Every member of the social network can simply click on the "share" or the "re-tweet" button to republish posts and spread information. Thus, a message or a post can travel around the world and be viewed by millions of users within mere seconds. Sharing information and ideas is an inherent part of interaction and interpersonal relations in social media. The dissemination of ideas can advance important issues to public awareness and lead to social, political and economic benefits.

Yet, this digital social sharing regime also allows vast opportunities to spread false rumors and defamatory expressions in a thoughtless click of a button. The spread of falsehoods causes severe harm to users and third parties. Holding the original publisher accountable and collecting damages from him is a very limited redress.

This research will focus on the dissemination of falsehoods in online social networks. An extensive volume of scholarly work, legislation and judicial decisions sought to meet the challenge of defamation online. However, these discussions did not lead to effective solutions. This research will strive to fill in the gap and meet the challenge of dissemination of third parties' defamatory content. Drawing on multidisciplinary social science scholarship, it describes how falsehoods spread in social networks, the motivations to disseminate them, the gravity of harm they may inflict and the likelihood for correcting false information in this setting. Understanding how falsehoods spread takes the first step towards providing a framework for meeting this challenge.

The research will examine a new perspective for resolving falsehood dissemination. It advocates harnessing the intermediaries of social networks' platforms to meet this challenge from the stage of the platform's design. It offers solutions for mitigating careless, irresponsible sharing of false rumors.

*The first solution focuses on a platform's responsibility in influencing users' decision-making processes. Nudging users can discourage them from thoughtless sharing of falsehoods and promote accountability *ex ante*. The second solution focuses on incentivizing intermediaries, thus allowing effective *ex post facto* removal of defamatory expressions from all the profiles and locations they were spread to. This solution is already technologically possible. For example, some intermediaries in social network platforms structure the sharing mechanisms by linking to the original post using an embedded link, which can later be disabled in order to effectively remove the content. However, shaping users' choices and designing platforms is value laden, reflecting a particular set of preferences of the platform and should not be taken for granted. Therefore, this research will propose ways to incentivize intermediaries to adopt these solutions and thus mitigate the harm generated by the spread of falsehoods.*

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