

Case study for the 2025 EEB National competitions

THE RISE OF MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

With the rapid growth of social media platforms and online news sources, the spread of misinformation and disinformation has become a significant issue. Fake news and misleading content, whether intentional or unintentional, can influence public opinion, distort facts, and harm democratic processes. The distinction between misinformation (false or inaccurate information spread without ill intent) and disinformation (deliberate false information meant to mislead or deceive) is crucial in understanding these issues¹. In both cases they represent false information.

In recent years, the digital age has seen a surge in both disinformation and misinformation, with concrete cases of falsehoods reshaping public discourse and presenting complex ethical challenges:

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, a variety of false claims about the virus spread on social media. One popular misinformation was the claim that COVID-19 vaccines caused infertility². Despite being debunked by health experts, this claim gained significant traction in certain communities.
- Deepfake technology has made it easier for individuals to create videos that manipulate real images and voices, often creating content that appears authentic but is entirely fabricated. In 2024, a deepfake video surfaced showing a popular political leader seemingly endorsing a controversial policy that the leader had never supported³. The video spread rapidly across social media platforms and was picked up by several online news outlets.
- Leading up to the 2024 U.S. Presidential election, false claims about voter fraud and election rigging began circulating widely on social media platforms⁴. Disinformation campaigns from both domestic and foreign sources attempted to sow doubt about the legitimacy of the electoral process, some promoting fake claims about voting machine malfunctions or unverifiable "insider" leaks regarding election results.
- Misinformation about climate change has persisted despite overwhelming scientific evidence supporting its existence. One of the most pervasive pieces of misinformation that gained traction in 2024 was the claim that climate change is a "hoax" created by global elites to push a political agenda⁵. This narrative has been propagated by certain media outlets and social media influencers.

The ongoing battle against misinformation and disinformation poses significant ethical challenges. Whether it's the manipulation of images and videos, the spread of health-related myths, or the undermining of democratic processes, these falsehoods have wide-reaching consequences. Ethical considerations often hinge on the balance between free expression, public safety, and the responsibilities of various actors in the media and technology landscapes.

Please, address these dilemmas:

- Who is responsible for curbing misinformation—the content creators, the platforms, or both?
- Should social media platforms be held accountable for the spread of disinformation, even if it is not directly created by their users? How should they balance their duty to free speech with their responsibility to protect the integrity of people and processes?
- Where should we draw the line between protecting free speech and preventing harm caused by false information?

¹ ["Misinformation" vs. "Disinformation": Get Informed On The Difference](#)

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/26/opinion/covid-vaccine-rumors.html>

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-60780142>

⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2024/11/02/social-media-election-voter-fraud-x-meta/>

⁵ <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2024/12/16/news/social-media-climate-misinformation>