Beyond Information: Online Participatory Culture and Information Disorder

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Information disorder (i.e. proliferation of misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, and hate speech) is contributing to intensifying global democratic backsliding, and diminished abilities to understand and address difficult challenges across diverse domains, such as health, migration, and climate science. A contributing factor to information disorder is the internet's participatory, collaborative, and remix culture, with platforms creating pathways for online audiences to create and spread problematic information. Researchers studying information disorder have become targets of disinformation and harassment campaigns, increasing burnout and underscoring the pressing need and ongoing challenges of conducting this research. These challenges stress the importance of scholars from diverse backgrounds coming together to build networks that increase both the quality of scholarship and capacities to protect and care for targeted researchers. In this proposed CSCW workshop, attendees will identify which directions of empirical research, methods, perspectives, interventions, public communications, and other actions should be prioritized as the community seeks to continue combating information disorder in this difficult climate. Scholars will then share and reflect upon concerns and harms they have endured in pursuing this work, sharing resources that have helped them through these challenges, identifying new potential resources, and opportunities to support one another.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing → Collaborative and social computing**.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Motivation and Background

Information disorder, which consists primarily of the spread of harmful misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, and hate speech [102], has contributed to major challenges around the world, including democratic backsliding [7, 9, 10, 12, 72] climate crisis denial [75], responses to migration [24, 35, 38], and health policy and access [8, 68]. Within these domains, information disorder has made it more difficult to understand and respond to already complex challenges, muddied public understanding of scientific outcomes and contributed to lowered trust in democratic institutions [21, 99]. Critically, these challenges are not geographically constrained and are visible globally, with researchers highlighting challenges in the Philippines [72, 73], Brazil [77, 88, 91], the U.S. [9, 69, 75, 94], Germany [29], Italy [79], India [3, 13], the Central African Republic [66], and other locations.

Information disorder has played a significant role in shaping recent conversations surrounding how governments, and government processes, are viewed by the publics they purport to represent. These conversations often involve a strong anti-establishment or anti-elite, populist tone that has been documented in Argentina [25, 26, 36], the U.S. [42, 43], and India [42], among other countries [55]. These narratives have acted as effective vehicles for allegations that elections are fraudulent or untrustworthy in recent elections in Brazil [88] (Rossini et al., 2023), the U.S. [83, 94], and Argentina [14, 26], that journalists are alternately corrupt propagandists or the enemy of the state [43, 61], that elites such as George Soros are interfering in elections or government [52, 82], and/or illegal immigrants are intentionally being allowed to vote [16, 37, 67], among other claims. Critically, the outcomes of these narratives are not constrained to the borders of a particular country. Instead, the success of a politician pushing one of these narratives may have ramifications for foreign policy and international alliances. For example, Donald Trump's 2024 election victory in the U.S. has already catalyzed shifts (e.g. [33]) due to wavering U.S. support for Ukraine [49], threats toward Canada, Greenland, and Panama [23], proposal to colonize Gaza [11], and the amplification of Russian propaganda by Trump, including false claims that Ukraine started the war or that President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is a dictator [92].

Modern information disorder is heavily participatory and leverages the incentives of the "attention economy" alongside affordances of online systems to spread messaging. Digital platforms have historically facilitated a wide range of collective action, ranging from "hashtag activism" [27] to election interference [46] to insurrection [56]. The same affordances and technical systems that enabled pro-social participation [47, 100] have increasingly been utilized to contribute to and intensify information disorder. For example, recent disinformation campaigns have effectively gamed technical affordances to mislead audiences by taking advantage of Google Scholar's citation algorithms, or by priming audiences to interpret hashtag limitations in a misleading way [98]. Moreover, the political right wing in the U.S. has integrated offline infrastructures into online spaces that capitalize on activist networks who facilitate the digital dissemination of false and misleading "evidence" of election fraud [83, 85]. This participation is possible because social media has created a unique space where audiences, political elites, and influencers can easily access one another. This access facilitates collaboration that combines offline infrastructures with digital storytelling, creating pathways of participation that simultaneously amplify and reinforce propaganda narratives [31, 85].

Numerous interventions and moderation strategies have been proposed to help mitigate the effects of information disorder. Several scholars have investigated the effectiveness of "pre-bunking" [62, 87], accuracy nudges

[17, 57], fact checks or context notes [20, 22, 51, 101] (Walter et al, 2019;), moderation focused on removing false posts or banning accounts [40, 41], and media literacy [28, 44]– among other avenues to reduce the impact of information disorder. Each of these strategies has pros and cons. For example, fact-checking can potentially mitigate the spread of misinformation while simultaneously documenting evidence that challenges misleading information. However, it is limited by the sheer scope and speed of false and misleading claims present online, which could lead to an "oracle problem" [6] in relying on outside information for ground truth. This problem is exacerbated by the perceived and/or real ideological alignment and agendas of fact-checkers, which can influence the fact checks they provide or allow their fact checks to be dismissed because of their political or ideological stance [53]. Additionally, individual pieces of information are often difficult to fact-check and don't fall neatly into a bucket of "true" or "false", often containing grains of truth [18]. Instead, false and misleading information is often ambiguous and relies on an in-group to know what frame to use when interpreting a piece of content [95]. Similarly, some interventions may struggle to be effective outside of experimental settings, although there is evidence that combining interventions is more effective than a single intervention on its own [5].

Complicating conversations about intervention strategies is the fact that many proposed interventions, most noticeably those relying on moderation of harmful content, require digital platforms to be willing and able to implement them. This platform reliance has historically posed challenges when government agendas clash with platform interests or policies, such as in India [54, 65], Myanmar [64, 81] and other nations. Recent events have seen social media platforms and technology companies roll back trust and safety teams and content moderation efforts [70, 80], instead embracing a "free speech absolutist" stance [58]. In some cases, this backtracking appears to be partly due to a desire to benefit from the communication power of social media. For example, in the U.S., X owner Elon Musk has used his platform to promote his political views and delegitimize political opponents [76, 90], including by amplifying false or misleading information that serves to support the efforts of DOGE, the organization currently dismantling American governmental institutions [39, 45]. These effects are not simply due to platform policy, however. Offline forces such as the lack of platform regulation or restrictions on researcher access to platform data appear to exacerbate already problematic dynamics, a contrast that becomes clear when comparing regulations around privacy and data in the European Union vs. the U.S. [15, 19, 30].

Researchers have also had to deal with challenges in performing and communicating about their work as scholars working to understand and mitigate information disorder have faced attacks (personal, professional, and institutional) and cutbacks [1, 50, 63, 71, 74]. These attacks are not just reserved for scholars, and appear to be designed to have a cooling effect on the ability of targets to continue their work, such as bogging them down in legal proceedings while simultaneously fishing (e.g. through weaponized FOIA requests) for "evidence" of alleged wrongdoing that can be amplified and tied to existing, often false or misleading, propaganda narratives [104]. In the U.S., these attacks have broadened to include almost all scientific research as the administration cuts funding for research across the board [78]. As scholars are increasingly drawn into the dynamics they study, it is imperative to consider how to continue to perform this work safely and objectively.

1.2 CSCW Workshop Goals

CSCW is an ideal venue for further examining these issues because of the deeply collaborative and interdisciplinary nature of the problem. Although information disorder spans legacy media, community spaces, and digital platforms, computational systems are increasingly used to facilitate the collaboration driving disordered information [9, 83, 84]. CSCW has a history of scholarship examining collaborative work, highlighting how online communities come together to form social movements [32, 97, 103] or engage in collective sensemaking around crisis events [48, 60, 96], among other areas [34, 59, 86, 89, 100]. This foundational focus on collaboration has been critical in drawing attention to the participatory nature of disinformation, propaganda, and other content associated with information disorder [2, 4, 83, 93].

We see the strengthening of scholar networks via convenings such as this proposed CSCW workshop as essential for ensuring that efforts to resist strategic disinformation can continue while simultaneously increasing research outcomes by facilitating cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural collaboration. We aim to bring together CSCW scholars from diverse disciplinary, geographic, and cultural backgrounds to critically examine the strengths and weaknesses of previous work and identify new priorities for moving forward. We seek to do so while engaging in the CSCW tradition of performing our own computer-supported cooperative work while simultaneously examining how cooperative work can, and has, played a critical role in the proliferation of disordered information. To these ends, our workshop has three key objectives:

(1) Developing and strengthening a network of researchers studying participatory online dynamics and information disorder within and adjacent to the CSCW community.
(2) Identifying, based on successes and shortcomings of previous work, what empirical research, interventions, frameworks, perspectives, designs (both technological and otherwise), and other actions (e.g. policy work or public communications) should be prioritized at this moment.
(3) Sharing experiences, resources, and best practices – as well as ideating on new ones – that can support the ability to continue doing this work under threats to researchers, institutions, and the field at large. This includes tangible steps that the conveners may take after this workshop to support each other in continuing this work.

2 Workshop logistics

We currently plan to hold the workshop in-person only to facilitate the ability to have candid conversations about potentially sensitive topics, build community, and ensure holistic and focused participation. However, this may shift to a hybrid format depending on global events. The organizers will provide all materials (i.e. post its, pens) and manage A/V needs. We plan on including up to 20 participants, excluding organizers.

2.1 Workshop Schedule

This workshop will run from 10am to 5pm, with lunch and other breaks. We outline a planned schedule in Table 1. However, based on the nature of workshop submissions, the number and interests of attendees, and current events, adjustments to these proposed activities may occur.

2.2 Welcome and Establishing Direction and Structure

Facilitators will begin the workshop by welcoming the group, reviewing the agenda, and establishing norms and goals for the day based on the attendees and interests represented. In the first session, attendees will introduce themselves and give lightning talks of their workshop submissions. The timing of lightning talks will depend on the number of presentations, and attendees will be informed at least 2 weeks in advance.

We will then develop initial ideas for the afternoon activities by having attendees put post-its on two activity boards. On the first board, “Priorities”, attendees will leave post-it notes about initial, early ideas of what they would like the field to prioritize moving forward in the beginning categories of empirical research, methods, perspectives, interventions, and translating research to the public (i.e. community education, public communication, policy). Attendees will also propose new categories, which may be used to guide this activity. On the second board, “Sustaining and Supporting this Work”, attendees will leave initial notes about worries, issues faced (i.e. burnout, harassment, threats), and resources that have helped them manage these challenges or resources they could have benefited from having.

We will then have lunch for socialization amongst the group while the facilitators organize the initial shared ideas to inform and guide the afternoon activities. This will allow facilitators to adjust the upcoming activities based on these initial ideations and attendee interests.

Table 1. Workshop schedule

Time	Activity and Description
10am – 11:30am	**Welcome and Introductions** Facilitators will review the agenda for the day and norms for the session. Attendees will introduce themselves and present their lightning talks of their provocation for the workshop.
11:30am – 12pm	**Establishing Direction and Structure** Facilitators will explain the upcoming activities and attendees will engage in initial ideation to develop topics and themes for each of the two interactive activities via post-it notes on established boards.
12pm – 1:15pm	**Lunch** Lunch will be ordered in or eaten near the venue, giving social time for attendees.
1:15pm – 2:15pm	**Activity 1: Identifying Priorities** In this activity, attendees will work in small groups to identify key priorities in previously established categories alongside additional recommendations for what the field should focus on moving forward. Each group will share one priority and one new category to consider for this prioritization.
2:15pm – 2:30pm	**BREAK**
2:30pm – 3:00pm	**Activity 1 Part 2: Whole Group Priorities** After the break, the entire group will discuss priorities, voting collectively to uplift a priority from each category and a new category to consider.
3:00pm – 4:00pm	**Activity 2: Sustaining and Supporting this Work** As a group, we will focus on and reflect upon the difficulties researchers face and the resources that have helped them persevere – and ideate new or needed resources.
4:00pm – 4:15pm	**BREAK**
4:15pm – 5:00pm	**Activity 3: Where to go from here** We will take this last bit of time together to reflect and highlight specific resources, priorities, and ways to sustainably support one another in achieving these priorities.

2.3 Activity 1: Identifying priorities

Our first activity will focus on identifying what we should prioritize in our field moving forward given the current state of the world. Attendees will be presented with a list of categories to ideate priorities within, using our initial categories of: empirical research, methods, perspectives, interventions (i.e. proactive design approaches), and translating research to the public (i.e. community education, publication communications, policy) combined with emergent categories from the initial ideation that should be prioritized.

Attendees will be split into smaller groups to work through each category together – generating ideas and developing their top priorities for each category. In addition, each group will propose a new categorical priority.Groups will share these priorities and their new categories at the end of this session. Attendees will be given templates such as power and asset mapping to help work through these categories but will have flexibility based on their interests and the identified norms and goals for the day.

After a break, this activity will resume with a whole group discussion building on the identified priorities and categories – and tensions that may arise from them. This conversation will be closed by a vote to identify the top priorities for each category from the group – and the top new category or categories the field should consider moving forward.

2.4 Activity 2: Sustaining and supporting this work

Our next activity will focus on sustaining and supporting this work. First, attendees will be invited to submit difficulties they have faced in doing this work (i.e. burnout, threats, etc) in an anonymous online form. Facilitators will collaboratively and in real time, categorize these difficulties with the group – distilling common issues faced, alongside power, stakeholder, and resource relationships within these issues. This will allow for a conservation about these difficulties without attendees needing to share their personal experiences, while still acknowledging these very real challenges and risks.

This will transition us to the second half of the conversation, where we will have attendees share resources via post-its (or anonymous online form, depending on attendees' preferences) that have helped (or not helped) them persevere despite these issues– or identify missing resources needed to continue this work. In doing so, we hope to ideate pragmatic asks that attendees can make to their institutions or, in the absence of institutional support, try to implement via other mechanisms to help them sustain this work.

2.5 Activity 3: Where we go from here and wrapping up

After another break, given the heavy nature of Activity 2, the group will come back together to collectively reflect upon both activities. We will highlight and summarize specific resources, priorities, and ways that attendees can move forward to support one another in pursuing these priorities and resources. At this time, attendees will work together to determine guidelines about what outputs and observations from the workshop will be shared in different ways and levels of visibilities – such as a public list of resources, a private social media group for attendees, and other outputs.

2.6 Post-Workshop activities and outputs

Agreed-upon outputs will be outlined on the workshop website and in other distributional methods. This workshop hopes to start future collaboration opportunities and real resource sharing as researchers seek to continue this work in an adversarial environment. Furthermore, we hope this will foster an ongoing CSCW community of information disorder researchers and future convenings.

3 Submission and recruitment for workshop

We welcome short submissions (2-6 pages before references and appendices) in the ACM single-column format (of which we will provide templates on our workshop website). All submissions should include an abstract (up to 300 words), which they can opt-in to having posted on the workshop website before the workshop. We will perform a single-blind review of submissions, evaluating them for relevance, originality, quality, and potential to foster conversation.

Contributions may include position papers, theoretical frameworks, literature reviews, a "prequel" or early findings of empirical work, "coda" work expanding on previously-published work, or other original submissions promoting conversation about information disorder and participatory online culture. Submissions may have multiple authors, but at least one author must attend the workshop and give a brief lightning talk about the work. We welcome various methods and epistemologies in submissions – community-based, quantitative, qualitative, policy, design-based work, and more.

We actively welcome submissions from contributors who are not "traditional academics" but practitioners from industry (i.e. Trust & Safety, technologists, journalists, fact-checkers, etc), governmental, nonprofit, or activist organizations. We also encourage contributions from individuals studying participatory online culture outside of the "problematic information" space – particularly those focused on social movements and activism.

Organizers plan to recruit from our professional and personal networks, social media channels, professional mailing lists and boards, and via targeted emailing of relevant organizations.

4 About the Organizers

Nina Lutz* Nina is a PhD student at the University of Washington working with the Center for an Informed Public. Her work broadly focuses on visual media's role in "problematic information" (mis- and disinformation, scams, online hate) and how participatory visual culture becomes part of information environments and operations – targeting high-stakes situations and core identities.

Stephen Prochaska* is a PhD candidate examining how disinformation targeting U.S. elections integrates offline infrastructures into online spaces to disrupt collective sensemaking processes while simultaneously mobilizing audiences to contest unfavorable election results. He highlights how influencers and political elites collaborate with online audiences in continuous storytelling, adapting to current events by providing frames that integrate those events into an ongoing deep story surrounding American identity.

Laura Kurek is a PhD candidate at the University of Michigan School of Information. Her research examines how state actors, particularly Russia, attempt to manipulate online information environments. Her work employs both quantitative and qualitative methods, and has involved data from social media platforms (X/Twitter, Rumble, Telegram) as well as peer-production knowledge sites (Wikipedia, English and Russian editions).

Marianne Aubin Le Quéré is an Information Science PhD candidate at Cornell Tech. Marianne's work spans computational social science, social computing, and communication, and her research examines how AI and emerging technologies impact news and civic information ecosystems.

Jason Greenfield is a Research Engineer at the Center for Social Media and Politics at NYU. His research examines harmful content in digital and social media with a particular interest in how humor helps hate spread online.

Joseph S. Schafer is a Ph.D. student at the University of Washington, working with the Center for an Informed Public. His work broadly focuses on the roles of influencers and sudden attention in impacting online information ecosystems and user behaviors, particularly as they relate to online news.

Phil Tinn is a Research Scientist at SINTEF and Research Advisor to the MIT Ukraine program at MIT, where he leads the development of its new research program on countering Influence Operations (IOs). He is interested in developing building blocks for war gaming IOs and associated hybrid threat scenarios as a training tool for improving collaborative defense capacity across heterogeneous stakeholders.

Daniel Schroeder, PhD Daniel Thilo Schroeder, Research Scientist and Associate Professor, excels in big data, complex networks, and digital communication. With SINTEF's Smart Data group, he improves AI with sustainable data processing. His research at Oslo Metropolitan links digital communication to African conflicts.

Shiva Darian, PhD is an assistant professor of computer science at New Mexico State University. They research how organizations and their clients navigate politicized data work. Their work spans studies on information disorder in electoral contexts, activist data practices that amplify lived experiences, as well as perceptions of data, technology, and surveillance in asylum and immigration contexts.

Sukrit Venkatagiri, PhD Sukrit is an assistant professor of computer science at Swarthmore College. His research examines ways to help people resist technologically-mediated harm, ranging from strategic misinformation and hate speech to privacy violations; build sociotechnical systems to repair trust in each other and our institutions; and empower people to advocate for their rights while refusing harmful data and labor practices.

Ahmer Arif, PhD is an assistant professor at UT Austin's School of Information. His research focuses on understanding the spread of misinformation and designing community-based responses to that spread.

Anirban Sen, PhD is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Computer Science at Ashoka University. His primary research interest is Computational Social Science, with a focus on analysis of large-scale media data. His research examines policy discourse in national and regional news sources, and characteristics and evolution of misinformation communities on social media.

Joyojeet Pal, PhD is a Professor of Information at the University of Michigan. His work examines how social media is used in political campaigns in India, and the specific role of social media influencers in mainstream politics. His work has covered the use of coordinated social media outreach and misinformation, and the broader intersection of technology and populism in current day India.

Kate Starbird, PhD is a Professor at the Department of Human Centered Design & Engineering at the University of Washington (UW). She is also a co-founder of the UW Center for an Informed Public. Dr. Starbird's research sits at the intersection of human-computer interaction and crisis informatics. Currently, she focuses on the production and spread of online rumors and disinformation during crises, including disasters and political disruptions.

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