

Event Report: Consultation on Gendered Information Disorder in India

On March 14th and 15th, 2024, the Centre for Internet and Society (CIS) & Point of View (PoV) co-hosted a two-day consultation in Mumbai to explore the phenomenon of gendered information disorder in India. Experts, activists, and community workers from across Maharashtra came together to address the manifestations and challenges of false and misleading information (i.e. “information disorder”) targeting marginalised gender and sexual identities.

Session Themes

1. Understanding Information Disorder

Speakers: Yesha Tshering Paul (CIS) & Amrita Sengupta (CIS)

The speakers began by defining important terms that are often conflated in popular discourse, namely disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation. Misinformation is false information spread unintentionally, such as rumours of home cures for COVID spreading during the pandemic. Disinformation is false information spread with the intent of causing harm, such as deepfake pornography. Malinformation is information rooted in truth, but manipulated or taken out of context with the intent to cause harm, such as by selectively highlighting the relatively low instances of trans individuals who have expressed regret after undergoing gender affirming surgery, in order to deliberately misrepresent the commonality of such outcomes.

The session then delved into how these feed into “gendered” information disorder, i.e. false or harmful online content that targets people on the basis of their gender and sexual identity, which disproportionately impacts marginalised genders and sexualities, and intersects with different identities and vectors of marginalisation (caste, religion, location, profession). This misleading information is often weaponised to demonise entire groups and incite anger and fear, and is deeply linked to online gender based violence—it perpetuates stereotypes and hate speech, normalises violence against victims and casts doubt on the experiences of its victims.

The speakers highlighted the role of power dynamics and personal influence in our emotional responses to information. *“When we think about the concept of truth, it is rooted in questions of power, knowledge or our lived experience. How do we emotionally connect with a piece of information?”*

The session also highlighted the absence of laws specifically tailored to address misinformation and disinformation, and the inadequacy of the current legal framework to

recognise the nuanced manifestations and impact of information disorder, suggesting a need for more tailored legislative measures.

Participants shared their personal experiences with gendered information disorder. One participant captured the complexity of this phenomenon—*“Hum kyun kisi cheez ko trust karte hain... shayad ye sirf sach aur jhoot ke baare mein nahi hai. Yeh iss baare mein bhi hai ki hum jab kuch lete hain, hum uspe kyun vishwaas karte hain? Agar hamare friend ne kuch bhej diya, hum itna kuch check nahi karenge ki yeh sahi hai ki galat.”*—pointing out that truthfulness is not the only factor that leads us to trust information, but also the role of personal relationships and who we trust.

The session concluded by reflecting on the importance of design in digital infrastructures—whether these spaces are accessible and thoughtfully designed, so as to mitigate the spread of information disorder.

2. Feminist Digital Infrastructure

Speaker: Sneha PP (CIS)

This session was led by Sneha PP (CIS), who introduced the idea of feminist digital infrastructures and their foundational role in building inclusive digital spaces and combating online gender-based violence and information disorder.

Digital infrastructures can be understood as multimodal platforms encompassing visual, textual, multilingual, and multi-format content. The session explored the underlying issues within our digital information infrastructures and how they can be weaponised to create and spread misinformation and disinformation. The infrastructures upon which the internet is built are not purely technological—they are also driven by politics, power, and privilege—adversely impacting the development of diverse, multilingual, and accessible content. These systemic inequalities contribute to significant infrastructural gaps in our information systems, and impact safety, free speech, and expression, fueling gendered information disorder, technologically-facilitated gender-based violence, and hate speech.

In exploring the role of digital infrastructures in present-day human rights discourse (particularly around gender, sexuality and feminism), Sneha questioned who gets to develop and control social media platforms, and power dynamics influence the circulation of information. Feminist digital infrastructures come in here as a way to build safer and more accessible online spaces.

Participants discussed feminist spaces in cyberspace, sharing experiences and strategies for dealing with online gender-based violence and misinformation. While participants pointed out the lack of (or transient nature) of dedicated feminist spaces, they also pointed out marginalised communities are able to carve out some space online to discuss their experiences with abuse or harassment, and that many feminists use their social media accounts as a space to share content and create safer spaces. This highlights the importance of facilitating technology to allow marginalised individuals to access accurate information and share their own opinions and lived experiences.

The session concluded with a look at the strategies that individuals use to share feminist content while navigating online violence and information disorder, and the need for constant effort to create safe and inclusive digital spaces for marginalised voices.

3. Fact-Checking Fake News

Speaker: Aishwarya Varma (Webqoof)

Aishwarya Varma (Webqoof) led this session on the critical role of fact checking in responding to information disorder, and the tools accessible to the general public to help us verify whether a piece of information is true or false.

The discussion started with a look at the myriad reasons why we may be susceptible to information disorder, such as our own ideological beliefs, the appeals to emotion by false narratives, and exploiting our internalised biases. This tends to create a sense of kinship with those who share similar beliefs, resulting in a resistance to double-check the veracity of information that confirms these beliefs.

Aishwarya highlighted that false information is widely disseminated through a vast network of channels such as the mainstream media (via television, newspapers and radio), websites, social networks, private messaging apps, as well as offline through community gatherings, speeches and word-of-mouth. This makes the influence of misleading content difficult to identify and measure.

Monitoring the news and trending topics and comparing them with official information to identify discrepancies is an important first step in the fact-checking process. Fact-checkers employ several tools to flag suspicious viral content for further verification. Participants were then guided through how they could identify potentially suspicious content by using free tools accessible via their smartphones or computers. Reverse image search and video verification software such as InVid can help determine the authenticity of visual content. This can be further verified by identifying geolocation via services such as Google Maps, checking whether this news has been reported by other reputable sources, and directly contacting authorities or on-ground sources. When it comes to AI-generated images, there are tell-tale signs to look out for such as unusual eye patterns, blurring, watermarks, or inconsistencies in the image.

The session was underscored by the key principles of fact-checking—origin, source, data, location, and motivation. Tracing the origin of a piece of information and judging the credibility of its source helps determine the likelihood of this information being true. This, in combination with determining accuracy, verifying the location associated with the information, and understanding the possible motivations behind disseminating this information, are all fundamental to establishing the truth.

Aishwarya concluded by reiterating the need for systematic and thorough verification processes, and the role of fact-checkers in contributing to a more informed and truthful information ecosystem.

4. Gendered Financial Mis-/Dis-information

Speakers: Garima Agrawal (CIS), Debarati Das (PoV) & Chhaya Rajput (Tech Sakhi)

This session was led by Garima Agrawal (CIS), Debarati Das (PoV), & Chhaya Rajput (PoV-TechSakhi), who highlighted how gender impacts levels of digital and financial literacy and access to digital devices across the world—for instance, 6 out of 10 users of e-commerce and digital payments in India are men.

The discussion began by setting the context for gendered financial information disorder, and giving examples to illustrate its various manifestations. Chhaya highlighted that there are several cases of financial scams which are explicitly gendered, giving the example of a popular scam where advertisements are posted on Youtube and Instagram for a fake work from home job packaging pencils, which is then used as a premise to extort money. Debarati explained how there are financial scams posing unique threats to communities that Point of View works with. For example, as transgender sex workers started using digital mediums for work, they had to navigate new financial scams, such as clients sharing fake or old screenshots from UPI. These platforms are mostly in English and inaccessible, so it is easy to commit fraud.

The speakers elucidated that it is not that women are inherently more vulnerable to financial fraud, but that the impact of financial fraud and the types of violence they face after, whether it is emotional, verbal, or sexual, is greater. This is due to the fact that they do not have full agency to make these decisions. The speaker cited an example where a woman was scammed out of her money in response to which her husband took away her phone—the impact of financial disinformation was that she lost digital access. Women hence face a double burden: they are not only threatened by the perpetrators but also by their families, who will blame them for their loss.

The session concluded with a discussion among participants, with participants sharing their own experiences of encountering financial information disorder.

5. Gendered Health Mis-/Dis-information:

Speakers: Amrita Sengupta (CIS) & Sneha PP (CIS)

In this session, participants discussed the false and misleading health-related information they have encountered, the sources of information about health, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality, and gender biases in healthcare.

Participants shared that physical health and mental health impacts LGBTQ community members four times more than non-queer individuals. It is difficult to find queer-affirmative healthcare providers, or providers who do not question caste. A participant gave the example of how there is a new hospital for transgender people in Mumbai, but trans community members did not want to avail of its facilities as they did not believe that the doctors would be appropriately sensitised. There are also only a handful of doctors in the entire country who can perform gender-affirming surgeries. Intersex children are made to suffer, their numbers are not counted and not included in birth certificate data. Trans people undergoing

hormone-replacement therapy are stigmatised, and there continues to be a false narrative that trans people are HIV positive.

There is a great amount of misinformation regarding sexual and reproductive healthcare. Firstly, the kind of information available in healthcare facilities is very binary. There is also a lot of misinformation, disinformation, misinformation around conception, pregnancy, and delivery—what to eat, how to avoid having a c-section, or how to guarantee the sex of your child. Moreover, most verified information available tends to be for western contexts. While health apps are available, they tend to focus more on advertising products rather than providing information. Another participant shared their experience of menstruation and puberty and its surrounding misinformation, such as delaying your period by eating particular kinds of food (much of which is promoted by popular social media influencers as well). Another issue with information around menstrual health, as shared by one participant, is that conversations mostly happen in binaries and conversations happening outside of them get shut down. Indian schools provide very limited information around sexual health, and learning happens more through community and friends and in some cases, family.

In discussions on mental health, participants shared that trans queer people struggle to find accessible mental health services as they are expensive and providers lack sensitisation training. Women's mental health is also not paid sufficient attention to, such as in case of women with postpartum depression who go undiagnosed, and people being teased and being called dramatic for having PMS symptoms. One participant shared: "Mental health impacts the LGBTQ community 4x more than any non-queer individual. Conversion therapy ki agar baat kare, jo facilities aur healthcare professionals hai, unko bhi nahi pata. But still if you go on YouTube, you will find many videos with millions of views claiming that they can cure homosexuality, ya fir aapke trans bacche ko cis bana sakte hai. Toh yeh information itni zyada strong hai ki it is an alternative system, jo itna lamba aapke samne khada hai ki usko break karna becomes very important."

The session concluded with a discussion on how to create health information that is inclusive of different identities and accessible to individuals, which is part of making the right to health a reality. The idea of misinformation must be rethought from a narrow framework, and we must move beyond simply fact checking towards making the correct information readily available and accessible.

6. Sex, Sexuality, & Sexual Orientation Mis-/Dis-information

Speaker: Paromita Vohra (Agents of Ishq)

In this session, Paromita spoke about the idea of disorders and her work at Agents of Ishq. She began by first asking participants to question their understanding of disorder, why it is considered to be a bad thing, and the dangers of us repeating the history of the word without knowing it. To illustrate this, she gave the example of how homosexuality was officially considered to be a disorder until the 1970s, across the different domains of religion, law, medicine, and psychiatry. Participants were asked to question what information is considered to be a fact—there is a story and context behind all the information we see.

Paromita then expanded on what dis/misinformation is about sex, such as that sex for pleasure is immoral or bad, or confusion about what contraception to use. One way to

counter this is by giving facts, the other would be to diagnose the problem and provide a prescribed solution, but to be prescriptive would be to say that there is one solution for everyone and everything. Through her work at Agents of Ishq, Paromita is working to provide comprehensive sexuality education materials to impact and alter mainstream discourse, create a positive, inclusive language regarding sex, love, and desire in India, with the understanding that every person is different. The materials that Agents of Ishq produces are for the purpose of protecting each other from harm, rather than people imagining what our sex lives could be emotionally or politically. The sexuality education they offer is on the basis of the lived wisdom of people, using an inclusive frame of emotion and experience, not identity.

Paromita also stressed that it is important for us to look at our reliance on facts and how that has its roots in colonial knowledge systems—feelings are not seen as fact. In terms of homosexuality, the Kinsey study, which studied sexual behaviour through subjective report interviews and had a large dataset, made a difference in the public perception of sexuality. One participant brought up the debate around abortion—“pro-life” advocates believe their viewpoint to be an inalienable truth (often on religious or moral grounds), while “pro-choice” advocates reject this perspective completely (usually on the basis of scientific evidence or simply that women should have absolute control over their bodies). In such a case, how can we take that into consideration, understanding that there can be different frames to determine what’s true? Vohra responded by saying that we need to rethink our over reliance on facts having the capability to change people’s minds as well.

7. AI and Mis-/Dis-information

Speaker: Padmini Ray Murray (Design Beku)

In this session, Padmini talked about Artificial Intelligence (AI) and AI bias. She first explained what we mean by AI, and how we need machines with AI to help us organise, search, and make sense of the over 150 crore websites on the world wide web. A metaphor that can help us understand how AI works, is thinking of AI as a toddler wandering through the world and gathering all the information it encounters while exploring. We call this gathered information a dataset. This is what data scientists use to build AI—AI is trained on datasets. Just as a child takes on their parents’ ideas of the world, not knowing anything else, AI is biased depending on the data it has been trained on. As Padmini explained: “People who are working as data scientists, as data engineers, they are also people who have their own ideas about how the world works. So imagine if you are thinking of a man sitting in America who may have certain ideas about India which may be inaccurate—all of these ideas that he has, or that other data scientists or engineers have—all of these ideas will shape the way that he trains Artificial Intelligence.”

The consequences of AI bias are far-reaching. It can have a direct effect on people’s lives—for example, if someone has been subjected to a financial scam and been threatened for not paying back a loan even if that loan was obtained fraudulently in their name, an AI algorithm might unfairly deny them from taking a loan in the future. Another example of AI bias is that results on search engines often have a gender bias. There are no guardrails that exist when it comes to using AI, and we are not confident that AI is not harming us by sharing news with a bias or a deepfake. AI software such as ChatGPT does not tell us where it gets the information

from, and by not telling us the source we are unable to cite, which is problematic. However, the session also brought out positive experiences with AI, for instance ChatGPT has proved to be a useful resource for activists and smaller NGOs by helping them with communication and organisational tasks that otherwise required manpower, technical skills, or proficiency in English.

To conclude the session, Padmini shares how we can help shift the narrative and reduce AI bias. One of the ways that we can help shift the narrative is that by building websites and creating more content on the internet, indexing it properly and making sure that it is readable by search engines. Padmini also advised participants to be unafraid to be an active part of the internet. Our use of the internet has been limited to social media and search, but we can also contribute to wikis and websites. Furthermore, to counter misinformation and AI bias, one of the most significant things people can do is be wary and cautious of sources. Like any tech, AI has both good and bad, we just have to be aware of how it can harm us and how we can talk to people who work in tech and in policy to ensure it harms us less.

Session Learnings

This discussion brought out the interconnected challenges of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation, highlighting how false or manipulated information disproportionately affects marginalised genders and sexualities, and often intersects with other forms of discrimination and violence.

The impacts and manifestations of gendered information disorder are deeply intertwined with online gender-based violence. It perpetuates harmful stereotypes, normalises violence against victims, and casts doubt on their experiences. This is exacerbated by economic inequalities and religious and caste identities, and extends beyond digital spaces to impact various aspects of life including financial security, healthcare access, and social perceptions.

India's current legal framework does not seek to tackle the systemic and structural issues that underlie information disorder, or to address the nuanced manifestations of information disorder. We see how digital infrastructures, influenced by politics, power, and privilege, contribute to systemic inequalities in information systems. These structural issues exacerbate the spread and impact of gendered information disorder.

Misinformation around women's menstrual and mental health, as well as LGBTQ+ healthcare, remains rampant. Additionally, there is a pressing need for culturally sensitive, inclusive sexuality education and health information that acknowledges diverse identities and experiences.

Artificial Intelligence, while often a powerful tool that is often of immense use to smaller organisations and activists, can amplify existing biases and contribute to information disorders. This highlights the need for ethical considerations in AI development and use, as well as efforts to diversify online content and representation.

Next steps:

- To develop more inclusive and accessible digital spaces based on feminist principles, and enhance fact-checking capabilities and promote digital literacy to effectively combat information disorder.
- To push for legislative measures that are better tailored to address gendered information disorder, and to advocate for government-funded campaigns to tackle health misinformation, particularly for marginalised communities.
- To foster partnerships between grassroots organisations to better understand and address local manifestations of gendered information disorder, and to encourage collaboration between policymakers, tech companies, and civil society organisations.
- To encourage the creation of diverse, multilingual content online to counter AI biases and improve representation in digital spaces, and to provide better support to online resources that provide inclusive and accurate information on sexuality, health, and gender issues.

Any attempt to address gendered information disorder in India requires a multi-faceted approach involving diverse stakeholders. This discussion underscored the urgent need for collaborative efforts to create safer, more inclusive digital environments and combat the spread of harmful content targeting marginalised genders and sexualities, and progress towards a more equitable and informed digital landscape in India.