Youth Against Misinformation: A Young People’s Campaign Against Online Harms

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“Often, only those who shout the loudest are heard, but I think that this programme is proof that small acts of thoughtfulness and integrity can also weigh in on the larger discussion. This gives me a lot of hope in the future, and about our generation,” Youth Against Misinformation Volunteer 2021.

Youth Against Misinformation (YAM) was a unique and innovative programme created by Restless Development and the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) in April 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Its aim was simple: to galvanise the energy and skills of young people to research and combat the growing misinfodemic around COVID-19, as well as other issues, on social media.

Over a period of eight months, 61 young volunteers were trained by CCDH to identify and act on dangerous misinformation online, particularly where it related to health, COVID-19 or vaccines. They collected data for research to be used by CCDH and successfully campaigned to make their findings heard at the highest levels of UK decision-making by tabling questions in the Houses of Parliament.

The Approach

From the outset of the pandemic, CCDH recognised that viral misinformation, its disseminators, and the platforms that enable its spread would be the central challenge to overcoming COVID-19. The promotion of false health advice and conspiracy theories online would continue to undermine efforts to tackle the pandemic and damage trust in health authorities when they were most needed. CCDH knew that bad actors and their networks operate with sophistication in digital spaces and that platforms fail to act on malignant content, so, a structured approach to both capture and analyse the breadth of the problem and deliver smart solutions was needed.
In partnership with Restless Development, CCDH equipped young people with the skills they needed to spot, record and report online misinformation at a time when its dangers were increasingly a reality. Volunteers were deployed into three targeted streams, each with their own objectives: Record and Report (RnR), Transcriber, and Stop Funding Fake News (SFFN).

The RnR team used fact checking resources to verify or refute the information being shared on various platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. They then used the available safety features to notify these platforms and recorded key information about the content in a database, such as engagement data on likes and comments to estimate potential reach. The posts were followed up on later to observe if any action was taken by the platforms.

The Transcriber team dealt primarily with online video content on YouTube, investigating the online channels of known conspiracy theorists and Anti-Vaxxers. Once a video had been identified as clearly containing misinformation, volunteers would then report it to the platform and transcribe segments to be used as evidence in CCDH reports.

The data they gathered was used to demonstrate the growth of misinformation online during the lockdowns and to campaign for the deplatforming of the most radical misinformation provocateurs. The evidence gathered by YAM volunteers proved crucial in the deplatforming of David Icke, Britain’s most prolific conspiracy theorist and a key figure in the distribution of online Covid misinformation, from YouTube and other social media platforms.

Both the RnR and Transcriber teams later supported CCDH in their investigation into Instagram’s new content suggesting functions. Volunteers were trained to trigger new recommended content features on Instagram and strategically engage with algorithms to test the impact these features were having on online spaces. Their research demonstrated that Instagram’s new algorithm was, in some cases, actively suggesting misinformation to its users.

The SFFN team (now called Stop Funding Misinformation) was supported to develop skills to communicate persuasively when approaching organisations and businesses online, and to encourage participation in the initiative. They began by identifying tweets that contained misinformation, then tweeted the users to request their deletion whilst sharing advice from CCDH on how to avoid spreading it. Later, they adapted their approach to target websites that were promoting harmful misinformation and fake news by contacting organisations whose adverts were appearing on those sites.

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Once they were made aware by the team that their adverts were appearing on sites containing misinformation; organisations such as MacMillan Cancer Support, St. Monica’s Trust, and AQA all confirmed they would remove them, depriving the sites of their advertising profits.

**The Experience**

The programme itself faced many challenges; from maintaining a supportive environment for volunteers, to ensuring that effective safeguarding procedures were in place. Measures that were implemented included the use of anonymous accounts for surveying harmful content to guarantee volunteers remained anonymous and the development of a supportive network that met for weekly online debriefs, regular one-to-one calls, and peer mentoring. This was especially important when considering the harmful and discriminatory content volunteers were being exposed to on a daily basis.

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In a period where social isolation and loneliness is high and has only been exacerbated by the pandemic, YAM proved an incredible example of forming an online community where connections were real and lasting for the young volunteers. It gave those involved a sense of purpose and belonging during periods of extended lockdown and many joined the programme because it offered them an opportunity to contribute in a meaningful way to the Covid mitigation and recovery effort.

In the process of generating impactful and dynamic reports, a new generation of young researchers gained skills and strategies that they could then pass on to their peers and their communities. Volunteers had the opportunity to develop a range of skills throughout the programme, including advocacy, communication, leadership, and resilience. The research garnered widespread media coverage and volunteers were able to engage with this publicity, including giving interviews on BBC Radio and Al Jazeera.

The innovative nature of the project enabled young actors to engage at the heart of one of the most pressing social issues facing contemporary society.
The Impact

YAM volunteers were essential to building the wealth of research that revealed how social media companies fail to deal with misinformation on their platforms. Together, through the reports Will To Act and Failure to Act, the team proved that social media platforms remove fewer than one in ten posts reported for coronavirus misinformation and fail to remove 95 per cent of anti-vaxx misinformation reported to them. Furthermore, the report Malgorithm uncovered that Instagram was actively recommending anti-vaxx and COVID-19 misinformation to users. The Stop Funding Misinformation initiative, continues to secure wins by demonetising climate denial, racist, and conspiracist websites.

The reports produced from this collaboration have been used in US Congress, UK Parliament, in government briefings and media reporting across the world, particularly influencing the deliberations surrounding the Online Safety Bill and the scope of online harms. The hours spent identifying, capturing, and researching harmful content have made a tremendous impact on the global discourse surrounding misinformation and platforms’ culpability in its spread.

Volunteers were empowered to use their position as digital natives to influence decision makers and put their skills to use to prevent harm in online spaces. Learning from one another and evolving their understanding as the project grew, they were able to chart new methods of collaborative research and forge a new path for young people who want to make an impact.

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