

ARTICLE 2 - Published on the EPALE Platform on 15th July 2025

<https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en/blog/algorithmic-violence-how-social-media-amplifies-gendered-disinformation>

Medea - Developing Media Literacy to debunk gender- related media manipulation and fake news, No. 2024-1-LV01-KA210-ADU-000243248

Algorithmic Violence: How Social Media Amplifies Gendered Disinformation

This article examines how social media algorithms exacerbate gendered disinformation, underscoring the pressing need for regulation, transparency, and critical digital literacy education.

In the digital age, social media platforms are not just spaces for communication and connection—they are powerful actors in shaping public discourse and influencing social perception. At the heart of these platforms lie algorithmic systems designed to maximize user engagement and profit. These systems, however, are far from neutral. They operate according to logics of virality, emotional impact, and monetization, rather than truth, equity, or safety. As a result, harmful content—especially gendered disinformation—is not only tolerated, but often amplified. This phenomenon, increasingly referred to as **algorithmic violence**, constitutes a structural form of harm that disproportionately targets women and marginalized communities.

Gendered disinformation refers to false or manipulative content that seeks to undermine individuals on the basis of their gender. Often grounded in sexist stereotypes or sexualized narratives, such disinformation attacks the morality, credibility, and competence of women, particularly those in public-facing roles such as politicians, journalists, and activists. A well-documented example of this involved German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, who was falsely accused of promoting mandatory COVID-19 vaccinations for children. The fabricated claim, first circulated in fringe Telegram groups, quickly spread across Facebook and Twitter, aided by emotionally charged headlines and visual content. Researchers later traced the virality of the post to algorithmic amplification and coordinated inauthentic behavior, demonstrating how digital platforms can become engines of gendered manipulation.

This case is far from isolated. According to a UNESCO (2021) global study, 73% of women journalists have experienced online violence, and one in five reported being attacked offline in connection with digital threats. “Online violence against women journalists,” the report states, “is one of the most serious threats to press freedom worldwide.” Such data highlights the broader pattern: algorithmic systems tend to prioritize content that provokes outrage,

controversy, and strong emotional reactions—conditions under which misogynistic disinformation flourishes.

What makes algorithmic violence especially dangerous is its invisibility. Unlike direct online abuse, which can violate platform rules, algorithmic amplification is a systemic and largely opaque process. Social media companies rarely disclose how their algorithms operate, making it difficult for users, researchers, and regulators to identify patterns of harm. Yet the consequences are real and measurable. Victims of gendered disinformation often suffer reputational damage, emotional distress, and self-censorship. More broadly, this environment produces a **chilling effect** that discourages women's participation in democratic processes, policy discussions, and leadership roles.

In recent years, the European Union has begun addressing these challenges through regulatory initiatives such as the **Digital Services Act (DSA)**. The DSA introduces obligations for very large online platforms to assess and mitigate systemic risks, including the spread of disinformation and online gender-based violence. It marks an important shift in how platform accountability is framed: not only as a matter of content moderation, but as a structural responsibility tied to the very design of algorithmic systems.

At the same time, **media literacy and critical digital education** remain crucial. While regulation is necessary, it is not sufficient. Users must be equipped with the tools to critically evaluate online content, recognize manipulation, and demand transparency. Educators, media professionals, and civil society organizations play a crucial role in fostering these capacities, not only to defend individuals but also to reclaim the digital public sphere as a space for inclusion, justice, and democratic debate.

Social media holds a paradoxical potential: it can serve as a megaphone for disinformation and hate, or as a platform for raising awareness, fostering solidarity, and promoting resistance. Women and marginalized groups are increasingly using these platforms to share their stories, build communities, and demand change. But this transformative potential can only be realized if we understand and expose the underlying forces that sustain digital inequality.

Exposing algorithmic violence is not only a task for researchers or policymakers. It requires **collective awareness, civic responsibility, and cultural transformation**. Only through a shared commitment to equity, transparency, and dignity can we begin to shape digital environments that serve the common good—and not the algorithmic logic of division and domination.

👉 The Erasmus MEDEA project: Developing Media Literacy to debunk gender-related media manipulation and fake news n. 2024-1-LV01-KA210-ADU-000243248 - deals with these topics. To learn more, visit the Facebook page and the project website to access the Media Literacy Toolkit and utilize its contents.

👉 For more information about the MEDEA project and to access the Toolkit, visit <https://www.facebook.com/MedeaErasmusProject> and <https://www.jelgavaszontaklubs.lv/projects/>

References

Gehrke, M., & Amit-Danhi, E. (2025). Gendered disinformation as violence: A new analytical agenda. *Misinformation Review*. <https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/gendered-disinformation-as-violence-a-new-analytical-agenda/>

Gillespie, T. (2018). *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media*. Yale University Press.

Noble, S. U. (2018). *Algorithms of Oppression: How search engines reinforce racism*. NYU Press.

UNESCO. (2021). *The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists*. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377223>

European Commission. (2022). *Digital Services Act: Regulation (EU) 2022/2065*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2022/2065>