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Corruption in digital environments

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Abstract. *The process by which individuals lose their psychological defences against normalizing corruption is known as cognitive immunity failure. The representation of corruption as inevitable, unchangeable, and self-reinforcing amplifies fatalistic narratives in algorithmically curated environments that are shaped by filter bubbles and echo chambers. By shifting reactions from initial outrage to numb indifference, these patterns weaken moral salience. Echo chambers repetitively assert fatalism through content alignment and repetition. At the same time, from a neuroeconomic perspective, the cost-benefit analysis shifts toward disengagement as repeated exposure devalues moral action, lowering the perceived expected reward of ethical engagement. This study examines how these dynamics, which are based on decision-value models, motivational fatigue, and social norms, reinforce one another and erode civic vigilance. We conclude by outlining three intervention frameworks: public education to restore cognitive immunity, norm-restoring campaigns that restore moral urgency, and AI design that combats narrative fatalism.*

Keywords: cognitive immunity failure, moral salience decay, corruption perception, neuroeconomic decision making, AI-mediated content environments.

JEL Classification: D73, D80, D87, D91, O33, H83.

1. Introduction

One of the most enduring problems in global governance is corruption, which undermines democratic accountability, distorts market mechanisms, and erodes institutional trust (Rose-Ackerman, Palifka, 2016). While exposing corrupt practices to the public can initially elicit moral outrage and inspire civic resistance, repeated and prolonged exposure to stories about corruption tend to result in a discernible drop in public participation (Bodislav et al. 2016). This change from active condemnation to passive acceptance is a cognitive phenomenon as well as a sociological one, indicating a weakening of the psychological defences against the use of unethical norms.

The breakdown of an individual's capacity to uphold ethical resistance when exposed to situations where unethical behaviour is consistently presented as normal or unavoidable is known as cognitive immunity failure. According to Haidt (2012), cognitive immunity is comparable to an adaptive defence mechanism against norm distortion, consisting of attentional, evaluative, and motivational components that maintain moral engagement over time.

The circumstances under which cognitive immunity failure presents itself have increased due to the quick spread of algorithmically mediated information environments. Modern digital platforms rely on predictive personalization systems, which are optimized for engagement rather than epistemic diversity (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017). When discussing corruption, these systems might unintentionally give priority to fatalistic narratives, which portray corruption as unchangeable, deeply ingrained in culture, and unreformable. The gradual decline in the attentional and affective importance of corruption as a moral issue is known as moral salience decay, and it can be accelerated over time by algorithmically reinforced exposure to such narratives.

The echo chamber structure, which minimizes the possibility of encountering counter-narratives or instances of effective anti-corruption interventions through algorithmic filtering, selective exposure, and homophily, complicates and intensifies the phenomenon even more (Garrett, 2009; Cinelli et al., 2021). The neuroeconomic implications are significant: when the perceived probability of successful collective action is low, the subjective value of ethical engagement decreases, resulting in disengagement in favour of alternative activities with higher perceived reward-to-effort ratios (Knutson. Huettel, 2015).

To investigate the relationship between predictive AI systems and the weakening of moral resistance to corruption, this essay combines psychological, neuroeconomic, and computational viewpoints (Bodislav et al., 2016). It aims to bring insight into the processes by which cognitive immunity failure develops, the sociopolitical ramifications of its entrenchment, and the tactical measures that could stop or reverse its progression by following the development from initial outrage to eventual indifference.

The relationship between predictive AI systems and the weakening of moral resistance to corruption is examined in this essay by combining psychological, neuroeconomic, and computational viewpoints. This study explores the processes by which cognitive immunity failure occurs by following the development from increased ethical salience to normative

passivity. It aims to give insight into the processes by which cognitive immunity failure develops, the sociopolitical ramifications of its entrenchment, and the tactical measures that may be able to stop or reverse its course.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1. Cognitive Immunity

Cognitive immunity is defined as the set of psychological and social-cognitive mechanisms that protect individuals from adopting maladaptive or unethical norms despite environmental pressure. This includes the ability to assess information critically, avoid engaging in corrupt behaviour, and uphold moral integrity when exposed to norm violations for an extended period (Haidt, 2012; Bicchieri, 2017). According to this theory, when these defence mechanisms weaken and the behaviours, they were intended to prevent become more common, cognitive immunity fails. The analogy to biological immunity is intentional: just as an immune system can be weakened by means of repeated exposure to pathogens, cognitive immunity can be weakened through repeated exposure to morally corrosive narratives.

Moral Salience Decay

According to Giner-Sorolla (2012), moral salience refers to the perceived importance, emotional weight, and attentional priority given to an ethical concern. High moral salience is linked to disapproval, a sense of injustice, and a readiness to take corrective action when corruption is present. When norm violations are repeatedly observed without accompanying proof of accountability or reform, the perceived importance gradually diminishes over time, a phenomenon known as moral salience decay (Brezina and Kaufman, 2008). Reinforcement loops that repeatedly present similar content can accelerate decay in algorithmically mediated environments, reducing novelty and emotional impact through habituation effects (Bargh, Chartrand, 1999).

Inevitability Narratives

Discourse patterns known as inevitability narratives present corruption as inescapable, deeply ingrained in culture, and unalterable (Luhmann, 2000). They can be explicit, overt claims that "corruption is part of our culture", or implicit, embedded in stories and commentaries that dismiss all anti-corruption efforts as ineffective. According to Cialdini and Trost (1998), injunctive norms, perceptions of what most people approve of, and descriptive norms, perceptions of what most people do, are shaped by such narratives, which promote acceptance rather than objections. Predictive content ecosystems may reinforce a sense of inevitability by using algorithms to preferentially surface similar content once user engagement indicates receptivity to these frames.

Algorithmic Echo Chambers

Through algorithmic filtering or self-selection, echo chambers are networked settings that systematically limit exposure to opposing viewpoints (Sunstein, 2017; Cinelli et al., 2021). Echo chambers can reinforce inevitability narratives in corruption discourse by repeating

stories of systemic dysfunction, failed reforms, and scandal persistence. This constant exposure weakens cognitive immunity by giving the impression that everyone agrees that corruption cannot be corrected (Bodislav, 2011).

The Context of Neuroeconomic Decision Making

From a neuroeconomic viewpoint, decision-making about civic engagement is determined by expected value computations (Kahneman, Tversky, 1979; Knutson, Huettel, 2015). When individuals perceive the likelihood of successful anti-corruption action is low and the effort cost is high, the subjective utility of engagement decreases. These calculations are distorted by algorithmic reinforcement of inevitability narratives, which inflate perceived risks and diminish perceived benefits, resulting in a self-reinforcing disengagement loop.

3. From Moral Engagement to Normative Passivity: Stages of Attention Shift

As social norms, informational reinforcement, and cognitive adaptation change over time, patterns of change in the public's engagement with corruption-related information can be noticed. The following stages outline a prevalent risk pathway in algorithmically reinforced environments. Not everyone follows this path; many individuals continue to pay attention and be involved over time through boycotts, investigations, coordinated civic projects, or strikes. Others organize and share alternative viewpoints through online platforms. These examples show resilience pathways, where engagement is sustained over time by both personal and contextual factors.

First Stage: Initial Moral Involvement

According to Rozin et al. (1999) and Hutcherson and Gross (2011), initial exposure to a corruption-related event that goes against individual or group ethical standards usually leads to an increase in attentional focus, evaluative processing, and motivation to discover further information. The individual's priority hierarchy places the subject at a higher level, which may result in ongoing monitoring, discussion, or information sharing. Such interaction may cause the algorithm in predictive content systems to prioritize related content in the user's feed.

Second Stage: Adaptation and Norm Recalibration

Repeated exposure to the same information may make the events seem less unique and exceptional, especially if there is no discernible systemic change. Descriptive norms *("this behaviour is common"*) may influence the cognitive categorization of the conduct, while habituation can result in a decrease in emotional intensity (Bargh, Chartrand, 1999; Bicchieri, 2017). The tone of engagement at this stage frequently changes from solution-oriented discussion to commentary that reflects a lower expectation of change.

Stare Three: Cognitive Fatigue and Attentional Redistribution

Maintaining focus on recurring topics necessitates ongoing cognitive and emotional resources. Individuals may experience cognitive fatigue when these are invested without

perceivable reinforcement, such as new developments or observable reforms (Muraven, Baumeister, 2000). Topic saturation brought on by algorithmic repetition may cause individuals to shift their focus to other topics that they find more interesting, fulfilling, or relevant.

Stage Four: Normative Passivity

Although corruption-related content is still acknowledged at this point, it receives less attention and elicits fewer behavioural reactions. By presenting corruption as a constant feature of the sociopolitical environment, inevitable narratives can be integrated into a person's larger interpretive framework. This indicates a change in salience rather than the complete absence of awareness, with potential implications for participation in related public discourse and activities (Miller, 2006).

4. Algorithmic Amplifiers

Digital platforms' algorithmic systems have an impact on how individuals discover, process, and rank corruption-related information. These systems work by using ranking, recommendation, and predictive personalization techniques that maximize user engagement. By doing this, they could influence the attention allocation process outlined in Section 3.

Predictive Personalization

Algorithms that modify content delivery according to past user interactions, deduced preferences, and engagement patterns are known as predictive personalization (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017). The system may make similar content more prevalent and frequent when users interact with content about corruption. This can eventually produce a steady informational landscape in which some narratives, such as those about inevitable narratives, are offered more frequently than alternative perspectives. This reinforcement is not always indicative and does not necessarily reflect the broader distribution of public opinion or events, but rather the interaction history of the user.

Echo Chambers Dynamics

Echo chambers arise when self-selection, algorithmic filtering, or both limit exposure to different points of view (Garrett, 2009; Cinelli et al., 2021). Echo chambers can cause framings, such as narratives highlighting the structural embeddedness or persistence of corruption, to be presented repeatedly in the context of corruption discourse. As discussed in Section 3, this repetition may help with norm recalibration by making some interpretations easier to remember and more cognitively accessible.

Loops of Engagement

User actions (such as viewing, sharing, and commenting) indicate the relevance of content to the algorithm, which leads to further prioritization of similar content. This feedback process is known as an engagement loop. This mechanism can maintain a large volume of thematically consistent content in a user's feed when applied to corruption-related topics,

which might accelerate changes in salience. The loop focuses on maximizing the anticipated interaction rather than the material's accuracy or representativeness.

Saturation Effects

Saturation occurs when the volume and frequency of exposure to a specific topic exceed the individual's capacity or willingness to process it. Saturation may result from recurring framing techniques or thematic emphasis in algorithmically mediated environments, in addition to repeated coverage of the same events. Regardless of whether the initial problem is still substantively relevant, this may cause attention to be redistributed toward other subjects, as outlined in Stage Three of Section 3.

5. A Neuroeconomic View of Salience Shift and Societal Feedback Loops

The context of decision theory, individuals assign attention and resources toward actions with higher expected value, calculated as the anticipated benefit weighted by the perceived probability of success (Kahneman, Tversky, 1979; Knutson, Huettel, 2015). The expected value of engagement may decrease if repeated exposure to narratives about inevitability or unchanging circumstances results in a decreased perceived likelihood of impact. This change is not always indicative of a loss of awareness but can influence the prioritisation of other activities perceived as more rewarding or effective.

Given the limited nature of attention, focusing it on a single subject has opportunity costs, or the potential advantages lost by ignoring other subjects or pursuits (Kurzban et al., 2013). The constant display of similar corruption-related content in environments that are algorithmically curated may make it seem more expensive to stay focused on the subject, especially if the user anticipates greater benefits from diverting their attention elsewhere.

Habituation is the process by which repeated exposure to similar content lessens its emotional impact and novelty (Bargh, Chartrand, 1999). According to reward-processing theory, the expected psychological benefit of discussing the subject may decrease with time. This reward devaluation is not necessarily linked to changes in the underlying importance of the issue but demonstrates a shift in how the brain weighs the salience of competing inputs.

Competition for cognitive resources is heightened in high-volume information environments (Simon, 1971). When a limited number of narratives are amplified algorithmically, it can create a sense of redundancy and decrease the likelihood that individuals will devote sustained processing resources to that information. This phenomenon is consistent with Stage Three (attentional redistribution) detailed in Section 3, which involves the reallocation of focus because of the repeated presentation of similar material.

Societal Feedback Loops

Changes in individual attention patterns toward corruption-related information can, when combined, contribute to broader societal-level dynamics. These feedback loops operate and function through the interaction of collective perception, institutional response, and information flows.

Participation in civic and political activities is influenced by public perceptions of corruption (Seligson, 2002). When large segments of the population evaluate corruption as structurally persistent, participation in formal anti-corruption initiatives or related civic actions might decrease. This change in participation can, consequently, reinforce perceptions of limited societal mobilisation, contributing to the stability of the original perception.

The level of public concern about corruption can be influenced by institutional responsiveness, such as public investigations, prosecutions, or reforms. Low visibility of effective institutional action can reinforce inevitability narratives by giving the impression of inaction or ineffectiveness. This may result into a feedback loop in which reduced public engagement is met with reduced institutional initiative, further lowering the visibility of change.

As discussed in Section 4, algorithmically mediated information flows can help selectively amplify specific framings. The collective informational environment may be shaped when stories about how deeply ingrained corruption is are more widely shared than testimonies of successful reform. As time goes on, the prevalence of these narratives can influence both public discourse and the strategic communication of institutions.

Attitudes regarding corruption can be transmitted across generations through socialisation, education, and media exposure (Mishler, Rose, 2007). If inevitability narratives continue to be prevalent in public discourse, they may influence the baseline expectations of younger groups, potentially stabilising certain norms over extended periods. This doesn't rule out change but indicates that shifts in engagement may operate on long time horizons.

6. Design and Mitigation Considerations

Both the technological and social spheres offer viable strategies for changing the informational dynamics discussed in earlier sections. These considerations do not prescribe specific interventions but outline areas where adjustments may influence how corruption-related narratives are encountered and processed.

Recommendation systems could be designed to expose users to a broader range of perspectives and framings on corruption-related issues. Diversifying the informational inputs available to users may reduce the dominance of inevitable narratives while increasing the visibility of diverse accounts, such as those describing reform outcomes or systemic improvements (Helberger et al., 2018).

Changing the frequency or sequencing of content could help avoid saturation effects (Section 4). This could consist of introducing greater intervals between similar content types or integrating topic rotations to balance engagement with novelty.

Including contextual information, such as historical trends, comparative statistics, or case studies, alongside individual corruption-related stories can help place events in a larger analytical context. This method can help counteract an over-reliance on impressions from a single narrative and allow for more nuanced interpretations (Thorson et al., 2010).

Educational initiatives that focus on information literacy, particularly in terms of framing effects and algorithmic curation, may influence the way individuals interpret and prioritize corruption-related content. Formal education systems, community programs, or platform-integrated resources can all be used to carry out these initiatives.

Collaboration between information platforms and public institutions could aim toward making sure that verified updates on anti-corruption measures, policy changes, and legal proceedings are made visible in relevant contexts (Georgescu, Bodislav, 2025). While the efficiency of such collaborations would depend on trust in the institutions involved, their inclusion in the informational environment could expand the range of narratives encountered.

7. Ethical Dimensions of Perception Change

In addition to changing what individuals pay attention to, changes in the informational environment, especially in spaces that are algorithmically curated, also affect how they understand the moral implications of corruption. These effects take place at the level of behavioural intention, moral cognition, and normative framing. While changes in attentional priority can be described in cognitive or neuroeconomic terms, they also interact with processes that influence moral reasoning, responsibility allocation, and perceived agency in addressing unethical behaviour and practices.

Entman (1993) defines normative framing as the presentation of information in relation to shared moral standards. When it comes to corruption, framing can vary from overt moral denunciation to pragmatic acceptance (Bodislav, Georgescu, 2023). Inevitability narratives, in which corruption is portrayed as a permanent feature of sociopolitical life, can change its classification from a clear ethical breach to a "structural reality." This reclassification does not eliminate legal definitions, but it can reduce the perceived moral weight of individual acts, particularly when they are presented as necessary for system navigation or survival in competitive environments (Bicchieri, 2017).

The gradual acceptance of such framing can result in norm drift, which widens the gap between legal standards and socially acceptable practices. In extreme cases, actions that are formally regarded as corrupt might no longer elicit strong moral responses since they are perceived as being in line with "how things work" rather than as deviations.

According to Bandura's (2016) theory of moral disengagement, there are several cognitive processes that can decrease the influence of moral principles on behaviour. These mechanisms may be strengthened by algorithmic exposure patterns in corruption discourse:

- Moral justification is the presentation of corrupt practices as having positive social effects, like facilitating economic growth or accelerating bureaucratic procedures.
- Euphemistic labelling entails describing bribery as a "facilitation fee" or influence as "networking," thereby minimizing the perceived ethical breach.
- Through advantageous comparison we minimise the severity of local corruption by comparing it to more extreme cases elsewhere.

- Diffusion or displacement of responsibility is built when accountability is transferred to "the system" or higher authorities, personal accountability is diminished and leads to minimisation of consequences, emphasising the absence of direct harm to individuals, thus decreasing the sense of moral urgency.
- These mechanisms, when reinforced by repeated exposure to specific framings, have the potential to alter the cognitive pathways through which people evaluate corruption-related behaviours.

According to Hannah et al. (2011), ethical self-efficacy is the belief that one can behave morally when faced with ethically challenging circumstances. Algorithmic reinforcement of narratives that highlight corruption's structural resilience can reduce perceived agency by portraying anti-corruption efforts as unlikely to succeed. Over time, this may result in a shift from principled reasoning, in which decisions are primarily guided by internalized ethical values, to pragmatic reasoning, in which decisions are prioritized for self-preservation or strategic advantage.

Decreased ethical self-efficacy can also lessen the perceived social and personal pressure to act. When individuals assume that most others are unlikely to engage in ethical resistance, inaction becomes less of a deviation from the norm and more of a standard or acceptable response (Branson et al., 2010).

Inevitability narratives do not consistently dominate the informational environment. Ethical salience can be maintained or restored by exposure to a variety of narratives, such as case studies of effective anti-corruption reforms, illustrations of institutional accountability, and cross-cultural comparisons (Bodislav et al, 2023). This kind of diversity encourages ethical pluralism, in which individuals interpret governance-related issues using a variety of evaluative frameworks.

Maintaining flexible moral reasoning in intricate political contexts requires ethical pluralism. Individuals are more likely to retain an evaluative position toward corruption that withstands total normative drift if they are exposed to and consider a range of moral viewpoints. Algorithmic systems that incorporate diversity-enhancing mechanisms (Helberger et al., 2018) may therefore indirectly contribute to the preservation of ethical engagement without explicitly advocating for any stance.

The process of framing corruption ethically is not limited to the individual. Individual moral reasoning interacts reciprocally with collective norms, which are shaped by public discourse, media representation, and institutional communication. Individuals may reassess their own moral judgments to conform to the opinions of the perceived majority as public discourse grows more tolerant of corruption as a structural inevitable (Georgescu et al., 2021). On the other hand, shifts in individual ethical reasoning, when combined, can alter the collective framing of the issue.

Analysing long-term shifts in the ethical salience of corruption in society requires an understanding of this reciprocal relationship. The interplay indicates that informational interventions, even if minimal in scale, have the potential to influence both personal moral interpretation and collective normative frameworks over time.

Normative Framing and the Reclassification of Corruption

Normative framing pertains to the presentation of information in accordance with collective moral standards (Entman, 1993). In instances of corruption, framing may vary from overt moral condemnation to pragmatic acquiescence. Narratives of inevitability, which depict corruption as an inherent aspect of socio-political existence, can reclassify it from a distinct ethical transgression to a "structural reality." This reclassification does not eliminate legal definitions but may diminish the perceived moral gravity of individual actions, particularly when these actions are portrayed as essential for navigating systems or surviving in competitive contexts (Bicchieri, 2017).

The incremental acceptance of this framing may result in norm drift, causing a divergence between legal standards and socially accepted practices (Georgescu, 2023). In extreme instances, actions deemed corrupt may fail to elicit significant moral responses as they are perceived as consistent with the status quo rather than deviations from it.

8. Conclusion

This study explored how individual attention to corruption-related information can shift over time in algorithmically mediated environments. A progression from initial moral engagement to normative passivity is outlined in the prevalent risk pathway discussed in Section 3. This progression is influenced by cognitive adaptation, informational reinforcement, and shifting social norms. While this pathway is not universal, it does provide a framework for understanding how specific environmental and psychological factors interact to influence engagement patterns.

Cognitive processes like habituation, reward devaluation, and attentional redistribution (Section 5) can interact with algorithmic mechanisms like engagement loops, echo chambers, and predictive personalization (Section 4). Collectively, these individual-level shifts can create societal feedback loops that impact intergenerational attitudes, institutional responsiveness, and corruption perceptions (Section 6).

The considerations outlined in Section 7 suggest that a variety of technological and educational strategies could influence the informational environment in ways that increase narrative diversity while decreasing saturation. These methods highlight possible areas of influence without recommending courses of action; they are descriptive rather than prescriptive.

All things considered, the analysis indicates that how corruption is viewed and prioritized over time is greatly influenced by the interplay between algorithmic content delivery and cognitive processes. Additional empirical studies could clarify the conditions under which engagement is maintained, diminished, or redirected, as well as the role of protective factors in sustaining long-term attentional commitment to governance-related issues.

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