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POLICY BRIEF

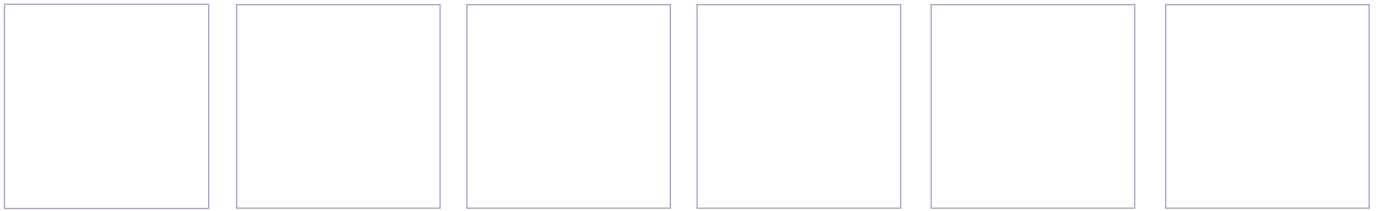
Online disinformation ahead of the European Parliament elections: towards societal resilience

Few would disagree that *fake news*, the most visible part of the war of disinformation, represents a real and present threat for our societies. On one hand, the debate on disinformation encompasses a spectrum of information types. From low-risk forms of click-bait to intentional attempts to corrode trust in our democracies, the latter sometimes by means of techniques that are extremely sophisticated and based on well-orchestrated plans by foreign states and local groups. On the other, accusations of *fake news* are frequently hurled indiscriminately and have themselves become a tool of delegitimation, as different sides attempt to impose their own narrative. And, paradoxically, the more *fake news* is discussed, the greater societal problem it is felt to be. This undermines trust in all media and instils the idea that it is impossible to know what is true and what is not. It is this distrust that is especially detrimental to the fundamental role of media as a pillar in our democratic societies.

These challenges need to be taken on board and addressed ahead of the upcoming European Parliament elections. If we believe that an informed citizen underpins democracy, then these issues require action. But what action exactly?

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The opinions of the authors represent personal opinions and do not represent the position or opinion of the European University Institute



Overview

This High-Level Policy Dialogue (HLPD), organised by the School of Transnational Governance of the European University Institute on 11 February 2019, brought together high level policy experts from the (social) media-sector, leading academics and journalists to debate the topic of ‘Online disinformation ahead of the European Parliament elections: towards societal resilience.’

The model of the School of Transnational Governance’s HLPDs is that of an open discussion among participants under Chatham House Rule. During the discussion, the participants recognised the important societal challenges posed by disinformation ahead of the European Parliament elections, as well as the dangers posed by societal distrust of the media as a fundamental pillar in our democratic societies and the risks of entrusting private entities and public institutions with the decision as to what is true or false.

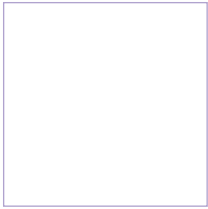
Starting from the importance of social media platforms taking all possible action as established in the recent European Code of Practice, the fundamental rights perspective provided the focus of the HLPD. The discussion of the Dialogue therefore centred around strengthening sustainable societal resilience by tools and methods like fact-checking, media and information literacy, media pluralism and the contribution of academic institutes as independent agents well positioned to foster balanced multi-dimensional approaches

Starting from the action and progress made on the issue of disinformation within the EU over the last year, this Policy Brief highlights some of the main challenges towards building societal resilience against disinformation in Europe.

In particular, the policy brief identifies three areas emerging from the discussions during the HLPD in which further action is urgently needed.

Action Points

1. Given the importance of both effective and sustainable responses to disinformation, well-coordinated academic research throughout Europe is essential. First of all platforms need to take further action by providing privacy-compliant access to data for the study of disinformation dynamics by academics. From the side of academics in particular, further action needs to be taken on the development of the European Centres for interdisciplinary and independent evidence-based research on problems of disinformation, as well as on the coordination of such research. The independent academic output and findings should serve as input to well-coordinated training programs for both public and private policymakers.
2. While media pluralism remains one of the strongest weapons against disinformation as it creates societal resilience and dilutes disinformation with fact checked information, pluralism is under threat and more action is required to protect it. To this end European wide monitoring of pluralism is essential, as well as further steps to create a future proof (regulatory) level playing field and the development of new business models in the sector, including attractive alternative algorithms to the filter bubble and impartial delivery by platforms.
3. Equally important for sustainable societal resilience is the strengthening of Media and Information Literacy (MIL). This requires a cross-cutting approach and greater investment and coordination furthering digital skills, diverse news consumption and critical thinking whilst avoiding a general feeling of distrust. The new Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) provides a golden opportunity to advance MIL also by giving regulatory authorities a coordination role.



I. Background: Advice and policy

Few would disagree that *fake news*, the most visible part of the war of disinformation, represents a real and present threat for our societies. The debate on disinformation encompasses a spectrum of information types. From low-risk forms of click-bait to intentional attempts to corrode trust in our democracies, the latter sometimes by means of techniques that are extremely sophisticated and based on well-orchestrated plans by foreign states and local groups. Information warfare requires capabilities that are both adequate and proportionate.

Luckily the evidence we have so far, from research carried out by the Oxford Reuters group¹, is that the direct impact of disinformation on political decision making is not alarming with its effects largely limited to groups of “believers” seeking to reinforce their own opinions and prejudices. One needs to also take into account that accusations of *fake news* are frequently hurled indiscriminately and have themselves become a tool of delegitimisation, as different sides attempt to impose their own narrative. And, paradoxically, the more *fake news* is discussed, the greater societal problem it is felt to be. This undermines trust in all media and instils the idea that it is impossible to know what is true and what is not.

It is this distrust that is especially detrimental to the fundamental role of media as a pillar in our democratic societies. Distrust muzzles media in their role as watchdog thereby severely challenging their ability to provide effective checks and balances. The societal distrust is furthered by so-called “deep fakes”, a development made possible by artificial intelligence whereby audio-visual content is manipulated in such a way as to make it impossible to recognise true from false.

These challenges need to be taken on board and addressed ahead of the upcoming European Parliament elections. If we believe that an informed citizen underpins democracy, then these issues require action. But what action exactly?

Report EC High Level Expert group

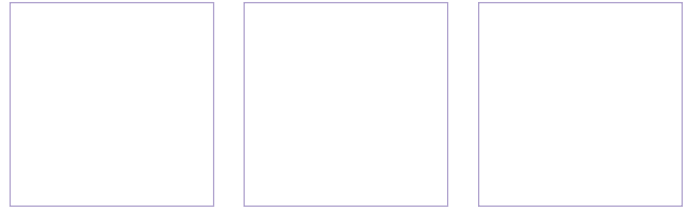
Within Europe several initiatives have been taken. In January 2018, the European Commission set up an independent high-level group of experts (“the HLEG”) to

advise on policy initiatives to counter *fake news* and disinformation spread online. The HLEG delivered a report designed to review best practices in the light of fundamental principles, and suitable responses stemming from such principles.

Disinformation as defined in this Report includes all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit. It does not cover issues arising from the creation and dissemination online of illegal content (notably defamation, hate speech, incitement to violence), which are subject to regulatory remedies under EU or national laws, nor other forms of deliberate but not misleading distortions of facts such a satire and parody.

This definition was uptaken in all the initiatives the Commissions took on the topic since then, as well as in the multi-dimensional approach taken by the HLEG. The HLEG advises the Commission against simplistic solutions. The multi-dimensional approach recommended by the HLEG in March is based on five interconnected responses. These responses rest on five pillars designed to:

1. Enhance transparency of online news, involving an adequate and privacy-compliant sharing of data about the systems that enable their circulation online;
2. Promote media and information literacy to counter disinformation and help users navigate the digital media environment;
3. Develop tools for empowering users and journalists to tackle disinformation and foster a positive engagement with fast-evolving information technologies;
4. Safeguard the diversity and sustainability of the European news media ecosystem, and
5. Promote continued research on the impact of disinformation in Europe to evaluate the measures taken by different actors and constantly adjust the necessary responses.



Communication and Code of Practice

Following the HLEG report, the Commission published in April its Communication on measures to tackle disinformation online, including an EU-wide Code of Practice on Disinformation, support for an independent network of fact-checkers, and a series of actions to stimulate quality journalism and promote media literacy. Based on the 10 key principles that were developed and agreed upon by the HLEG, a Multi-stakeholder Forum developed a Code of Practice in September.

The Forum includes representatives of online platforms as well as the advertising industry and advertisers. This was the first time worldwide that industry agreed, on a voluntary basis, to self-regulatory standards on disinformation. The first results were published in January 2019. The reports show that online platforms and advertisement industries have indeed taken action, but further efforts must be deployed to improve the reliability of the online ecosystem. Not all actions are taken up in all member states, and most notably, the platforms have not put enough effort into supporting (independent) research, and providing privacy-compliant access to data for the study of disinformation dynamics by academics. In its monitoring during the coming months ahead of the elections the Commission will pay special attention to the reporting on the implementation of policies and tools that relate to the integrity of electoral processes.

Action Plan Elections

On 5 December 2018, the European Commission and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy presented the 'Action Plan against Disinformation' setting out concrete measures to tackle disinformation in Europe and beyond (western Balkans and eastern and southern neighbours of EU).

This Action Plan very explicitly refers to Hybrid Threats and disinformation coming from foreign States such as the Russian federation that may influence public opinion and introduces a Rapid Alert System to provide real-time alerts on disinformation campaigns. Member States are to set up a contact point in their strategic communication departments exchanging information and cooperating with national and EU election networks. Online platforms should provide input and work with the Rapid Alert System. Fact based and effective communication

from EU institutions as well as member states should be used to counter and deter the disinformation by countering myths. According to the Action Plan online platforms should:

- Check the identity of political advertisers
- Close down fake accounts
- Identify bots and label them accordingly.

II. Backdrop: High Level Policy Dialogue

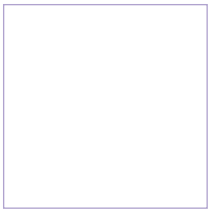
It is fundamental to note that all of the content that is referred to as disinformation is not illegal. Entrusting private entities and public institutions with the decision as to what is true or false while playing the role of censors entails serious risks for fundamental rights, with the serious risk of throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

Consequently, the HLPD on Disinformation ahead of the European Parliament elections started from a fundamental rights perspective and focused on the strengthening of societal resilience by tools and methods like **fact-checking, media- and information literacy, media pluralism** and the **contribution of academic institutes** as independent agents well positioned to foster balanced multi-dimensional approaches.²

Session I: The Fundamental Rights perspective

Globally we witness increasing calls for certain sources and websites to be blacklisted, blocked or demoted in searches. Global platforms are not only pressured to filter disinformation but also to make available the private data of those who have allegedly published *fake news* or defamatory statements in judicial proceedings taking place in distant jurisdictions where they have no effective way to defend themselves. In this context, various forms of private and public censorship are increasingly likely to occur.

At the core of democracy there lies a paradox. It both depends on and is itself a search for truth that can only be attained by the contrasting and discussion of different viewpoints. The need for states to address potentially detrimental forms of disinformation that are sometimes state-driven and attempt to corrode trust in democracies requires attention.



The first session set out to discuss these issues and address a series of related questions, including: What responses will avoid the risks posed by private and public censorship while being simultaneously effective? How can censorship of legitimate speech be avoided in line with international human rights standards? Fact-checking has an important role to play, provided it is independent and free from any political influence. How and by whom should fact-checking be organised and carried out? Is there a fundamental right to correct fact-checked information?

While some argued for the right to reliable knowledge or the right to be informed in a verifiable way could be envisaged within the right to information, overall, there was broad consensus that a fundamental right to correct fact-checked information does not exist, and could even endanger democracy. However, the right to receive information in the public sphere and the democratic search for truth by citizens was considered central to democracy. Further, while the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) protects opinions as well as facts, greater attention to which areas are more ‘dangerous’ and require limitations of Article 10 and where it is most important to have accurate and reliable information may be needed. While evidence based ‘truth’ may be expected in certain areas such as health, in the realm of politics open debates must always be facilitated. However, this must contend with the fact that our political discussion is increasingly being blurred by information that is untrustworthy.

With regard to the question of who should decide what is true and false, there was consensus that it should not be public or private actors – neither governments nor platforms – but well-informed citizens with a special responsibility held by independent fact checkers and journalists that need to be placed in a position to actually be able to do their fact checking and editorial work.

In this context, the role of media and the responsibility of journalists were discussed. On one hand the problems in defining who is a journalist today was raised, as media freedom also entails specific duties for journalists, as opposed to individuals. On the other, the responsibility of large media organisations was also debated, also with regard to their responsibility in shaping citizens’ views over time. Further, the role of courts and the question of jurisdiction were debated, also in light of problems of representation and trials in absentia. In this context, the question of how to treat digital platforms and their rela-

tionship with users was raised, also in relation to whether courts should exercise some degree of deference to the institutional mechanisms of digital platforms. Further, while platforms should never act as arbiters of truth, they should always act responsibly when promoting sponsored content and deciding whether to accept transactions.

Finally, some participants expressed their preoccupation that certain mechanisms contained in the Action plan could be detrimental to freedom of information as enshrined in the Charter and the ECHR, including East Stratcom and the Rapid Alert System, but only in so far as to the content is concerned, as opposed to fake accounts.

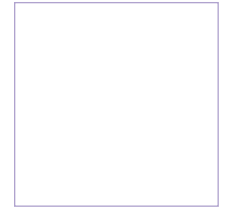
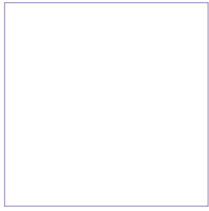
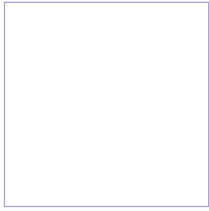
The session concluded that from a fundamental rights perspective while there may not be a silver bullet answer to counter disinformation online, we must take care that the antidote is not worse than the problem it is trying to solve. In this context the best answer may lie in creating societal resilience against disinformation ahead of the European Parliament elections.

TAKE AWAY

- ▶ Strengthening societal resilience is the only truly future-proof way to counter disinformation while maintaining fundamental rights, including through fact-checking, media- and information literacy for young and old, media pluralism and the contribution of academic institutes as independent agents well positioned to foster balanced multi-dimensional and sustainable approaches.

Session II: Media and information literacy

Given today’s information overload, MIL is a crucial component of critical thinking as it can enable reasoned participation in the on-line public sphere. MIL can also



help to contribute to a more trustworthy digital information ecosystem: a critical readership will provide an incentive to media companies to continuously improve their products and services. From a European perspective, education is considered an area of “supporting competence” for which the EU can support, coordinate and supplement Member State action. At the same time, the revised AVMSD introduces new media literacy obligations for Member States and videosharing platforms.

The second session of the HLPD discussed these issues and sought to answer the following questions: what actions are currently being applied and can be taken in this field? What overarching solutions should be put in place and how? With regard to defining ‘media literacy’, it is essential to have a multidimensional understanding of the concept beyond a focus on functional skills, which should be citizen (recipient)-centred, multidisciplinary and focusing on critical understanding and the ability to recognise the difference between opinion and fact. The current digital environment is illegible for the majority of the population and MIL has a key role to play in this respect, building on many years of experience in the field.

However, it must also be recognised that MIL is not a silver bullet – it is important to reach an understanding of what MIL can solve and where other responses may be necessary. Further, the need to focus on long term as well as short term solutions was emphasised as no simplistic solution will work in the field and behaviour change programs also form a key part of MIL.

MIL must always be seen within the broader context in which we witness a decrease and erosion of trust in sources of authoritativeness, but also in institutions. Unless these problems are also addressed MIL efforts will prove ineffective. In fact, the creation of ‘knowledge’, as opposed to information, presupposes trust and authority. Transparency was highlighted as a key ingredient to increasing trust and credibility, especially with regard to the processes used by platforms. In this context it is essential that platforms disclose as much information as possible and help people understand ‘why they are seeing what they are seeing’.

While the public, people and users are extraordinarily diverse, blanket MIL policies risk increasing inequality and marginalisation unless they are carried out paying attention to the relevant audience, including the way

young people form their opinions today. It is also essential to go beyond established media, create ‘ambassadors’ and find easy messages, although this should never amount to ‘dumbing down’ media literacy. On one hand there is no one size fits all approach to MIL as needs are very diverse, on the other there is a general lack of evaluation of existing initiatives. The question of how to measure the impact of MIL initiatives was also raised in this context.

Taking stock of what has been done with regard to MIL todate, many ‘missed opportunities’ in MIL had to be regretted. Although the notion of MIL has been discussed for decades, its action implementation remains the main problem, as well as the need for coordination. While there are large numbers of MIL projects across Europe, lack of coordination both at the European and at the local level remains a problem.

The need for a cross - cutting approach, as well as the need for integration especially in the education sector, but also in other government policy areas, were considered essential in this respect. On one hand, the media sector and the education sector need to work together on MIL, also in the context of the huge opportunities offered by educational technology. On the other, further attention also needs to be devoted to reaching those who are not in education, and identifying which policy actors may be central to these efforts, whether for instance public service media, libraries or commercial actors.

Other key challenges were seen to lie not only in the linguistic diversity in Europe, but also in the question of shared competences between the EU and member states. The new AVMSD which includes an obligation on states to report presents a key opportunity in this respect, in which media regulators could also play a role. In particular article 33a calls on Member States to promote and take measures for the development of media literacy skills, while article 28b imposes on states the obligation to ensure VSP ‘effective media literacy measures and tools and raising users’ awareness of using those measures and tools’. Finally, article 30b also provides a role for European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services (ERGA) to exchange experience and best practices on MIL.

A number of examples of MIL initiatives were discussed in this respect including:



- ‘Klicksafe’ in Germany sponsored by the EU³ - It was seen as successful example as it used simple language, had a budget for marketing and involved ‘you-tubers’ as influencers targeting youths.
- ‘Media scout’ which covered 800 schools in Northern region of Germany, was seen as an example of using appropriate language and creating ambassadors.⁴
- ‘Be Media Smart’ by Media Literacy Ireland, which was aimed at general public, and received huge support from a number of actors, including PSM, broadcasters and platforms.⁵
- Facebook ten tips to check *fake news*.⁶ Caution was expressed by participants with regard to this type of initiative as the risk of backfire and creating complete cynicism towards news must be avoided at all costs, given the key role of good functioning media to counter disinformation.

More generally it was emphasised that MIL, both for the young and old, plays an important role in strengthening societal resilience against disinformation. However, MIL campaigns on disinformation too may face the risk of ‘throwing away the baby with the bathwater’.

The more the dangers of *fake news* are outlined and warnings are signalled, the greater societal problem it is felt to be. This undermines the general trust in all media and instils the idea that it is impossible to know what is true and what is not. It is this distrust that is especially detrimental to the fundamental role of media as a pillar under our democratic societies. When audiences do not know what to believe anymore the media as a watchdog is muzzled.

Therefore, all MIL efforts should be designed by true MIL professionals in the field that use the utmost care. Creating a general atmosphere of distrust should be avoided at all costs. A positive stance is the preferred way forward to further societal resilience, for instance by focusing on the importance of breaking out of the filter bubble. Well-balanced information on the importance of diverse consumption of news truly empowers consumers towards well-informed opinions, whilst avoiding the self-fulfilling prophecy of distrust.

TAKE AWAY

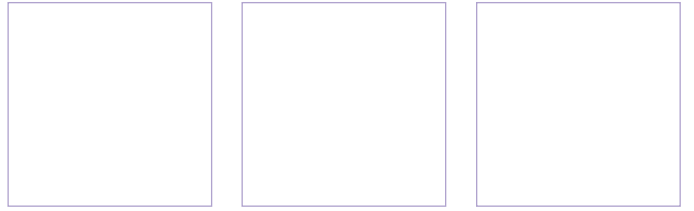
- ▶ MIL efforts require a cross-cutting approach and greater investment and coordination furthering digital skills, diverse news consumption and critical thinking whilst avoiding a general feeling of distrust.
- ▶ The new AVMSD provides a golden opportunity to advance MIL also by giving regulatory authorities a coordination role.

Session III: Challenges for Media Pluralism

Independent and pluralistic media are crucial components of a democratic society. Diluting disinformation through enhanced visibility of a wide variety of trusted news can therefore only achieve its goals if combined with actions designed to preserve diversity and the long-term economic sustainability of the news media eco system. How can sustainability be ensured given that news media is currently undergoing a transformation from the traditional off-line environment to the online distribution model? How does one define quality journalism? What measures are needed to ensure that certain forms of journalism remain financially viable? Should states and public bodies play a key role in this dynamic?

Media diversity is a key factor in building societal resilience against the impact of disinformation. Today there is an urgent need to maintain plurality in the media, both from the media perspective and from the consumer perspective; the more diverse news is consumed the less likely it is that disinformation is believed to be truth by creating natural checks.

Digitalisation continues to disrupt traditional media. Data reveals a continuous migration of advertising towards the digital environment: since 2016, internet advertising revenues, mostly driven by mobile phones, have surpassed



broadcasting TV revenues. In digital advertising Google and Facebook get the lion's share: in 2017 they accounted for more than 60% of global online ad revenues, while the share is even higher in European countries. The other economic threat to media plurality includes the separating of information distribution from the physical originating media thereby reducing the second source of revenue of traditional media: sales to readers and viewers.

At the same time technology has created significant challenges for the quality of information, including the disappearance of many traditional and local media as a source of qualified opinion, the absence of editorial control and editorial responsibility in the distribution model of information typical of major internet players, and the polarisation of opinions in filter bubbles and echo chambers. While traditional media face increasing economic problems, disinformation requires enormous effort for traditional media, as fact-checking requires time and money.

In this context, there is an urgent need to create better level playing field and come up with competitive business models, also with respect to data and advertising. While consumption of the media has increased, the entire audio-visual sector is changing dramatically and traditional media have not found alternative business models. Traditional media therefore need to work on improving their business models, while exploiting the role of data and the new market for data. The question of public interventions and public financing was discussed as well as the risk of loss of independence. If a well-functioning media system is considered a public good, we need to find ways to counteract the disruption of traditional media. A number of good practices or proposals were put forward in this respect, including training for journalists, support for innovation, MIL, facilitating tools for fact-checking, as well as the idea of a 'citizens' credit'.

At all times, however, it is essential to avoid mixing of sponsored and editorial content, while hidden agendas are increasingly difficult to spot with the rise of content marketing. Supporting start-ups, crowd sources, subscription fees and tax incentives were also put forward as possible good practices. Examples of private intervention, included the Facebook Journalism Project (similar to the Google news initiative),⁷ which aims to train journalists to better target audiences and identify how to use social media to become more innovative, and develop successful business models based also on data analytics.

TAKE AWAY

► While media pluralism remains one of the strongest weapons against disinformation as it creates societal resilience and dilutes disinformation with fact checked information, pluralism is under threat and more action is required to protect it.

► To this end European wide monitoring of pluralism is essential, as well as further steps to create a (regulatory) level playing field and the development of new business models in the sector, including attractive alternative algorithms to the filter bubble and impartial delivery by platforms.

Caution about the risks of a race to the bottom to not correct the titles of news items was expressed in this context, as well as the need to ensure independence.

At the same time market concentration must be monitored closely and Member States, EU Institutions, regulators must be diligent in regulating markets. With respect to media concentration, we are experiencing substantial concentration movements. In this context regulatory authorities have a key role to play, including in the implementation of the AVMSD and video sharing platform regulations. The question of whether it is still meaningful to measure pluralism was discussed, and while the answer was always positive, there was also agreement that we need to improve the way we measure the concentration of media markets, also by including a consumer perspective, in which reach is equally important as offer of media content.

Session IV: The role of academia

The evolving nature of disinformation requires a substantial strengthening of detection and analytical capabilities. While independent fact-checking is important to identify individual cases of disinformation, continuous, multi-disciplinary research is necessary to foster a better



understanding of the actors, the reasons behind, the techniques and methods used to maximise the impact of increasingly sophisticated disinformation strategies. An in-depth knowledge of local information environments is important to prioritise research efforts around topics with high impact on national audiences. At the same time, effective coordination among researchers in different Member States is essential in view of the transnational nature of the phenomenon.

Against this backdrop, the last session aimed to answer the following questions: What type of independent research should be promoted in order to ensure robust and evidence-based policy responses? What should be the role of public authorities in supporting such endeavours? How could national research teams best coordinate their efforts at EU level?

The current information disorder is part of wider set of socio-political changes. Communication technologies have created an abundance of information, including false information, which may in turn have insulated some citizens from trustworthy sources. Wider participation in and diversity of the public sphere is accompanied by political contestation of traditionally authoritative sources. While academic understanding of these phenomena is evolving, in the short term a substantial strengthening of detection and analytical capabilities directed specifically at disinformation is needed.

It has been noted that a large part of the current disinformation discussion and research focuses on US realities and may not easily translate to European contexts, particularly across different political systems, media ecosystems and diverse languages. The challenges posed by these diverse contexts are highlighted by platforms' partial failure to implement measures under the Code of Practice against Disinformation in all EU Member States. While in-depth knowledge of local information environments is important to prioritise research efforts around topics with high impact on national audiences, research needs to be coordinated around a common definition of the disinformation problem and must aim towards common policy prescriptions at the European level and across Member States.

Various academic disciplines engage with different aspects of information disorder, from the cybersecurity aspects of disinformation or the impact of information design on user assessments of content credibility, to architectural

questions such as the role algorithms in news diffusion and consumption; finally, there are important legal questions such as whether private digital platforms are part of the public sphere.

On a practical level, there are significant efforts on developing fact-checking methods and assistive technologies. Participants highlighted good practices of multi-disciplinary collaboration including new research projects and teaching programs, sometimes set up in partnership with private companies. As academic disciplines define their own problems and do not naturally speak the same conceptual language, a coordinated effort is needed to integrate insights from across disciplines and focus on delivering coherent policy recommendations. While the implementation of the MIL mandate under the AVMSD has seen some media regulators emerge as catalysts for multi-disciplinary collaborations, an EU wide very systematic mobilisation of resources and expertise is needed, for instance by establishing the network of research centres on disinformation called for by the HLEG.

The platforms' crucial role in facilitating research was acknowledged, due to the wealth of relevant data that they hold. Two specific examples of access to platform data were discussed in detail:

- The Social Science One⁸ partnership with Facebook to facilitate research on democracy & elections. While the initiative was commended, participants stressed that European researchers had not yet obtained access to the data, nor had they received responses to their inquiries. Furthermore, it was felt that the focus on elections was too narrow compared to the challenges posed by information disorder and that a broader investigation of media consumption patterns was necessary.
- Transparency of political ads,⁹ which was one of the specific commitments included in the Code of Practice. This measure had not yet been implemented in the EU (with the exception of the UK). It was hoped that upgrades envisaged for the European roll-out would address current limitations which hinder effective research, for instance in the database search function.

Platforms also hold a wealth of other data not currently subject to either transparency or research access measures. For instance, there is no access scheme for data on organic news diffusion, which is relevant for evaluating



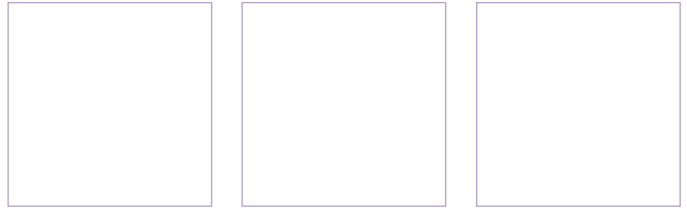
the share of mis / disinformation in the citizens' actual news diet, as well as identifying those particularly vulnerable to being insulated from trustworthy content. Recent experiments in providing platforms' users with fact-checked content have also generated vast amounts of data, currently unavailable for research. Similarly, when pages and accounts are removed for coordinated inauthentic behaviour, richer data on the behaviour and methods of these malicious actors could be made available for research. At the same, data scraping, even when specifically conducted for academic purposes, remains prohibited by most platforms' policies and is sometimes thwarted by technical means, thus hindering independent research.

The overarching question was raised of how to structure the data held by platforms for research access purposes. Furthermore, significant and legitimate challenges in providing access to data were noted, in particular with regard to the depersonalization of user data and the risk that malicious actors reverse engineer and learn how to exploit the platforms' technical responses to disinformation. However, these challenges could be addressed by proper coordination and drawing more broadly on existing academic expertise at an early stage.

There was broad agreement that research was essential in order to:

- Systematically identify disinformation topics and trends, beyond the anecdotal examples found by fact-checking;
- Characterise the technical means (bots, deceptive pages, sponsored content) and dissemination vectors (e.g. influencers, online messaging groups);
- Achieve a citizen-centric behavioural diagnosis, i.e. who is reached by disinformation, who is insulated from trustworthy content, what is the actual persuasive impact of disinformation;
- Assess the effectiveness of interventions on platforms and other initiatives, such as media literacy and fact checking efforts, but also for the adaptation of media & public communication responses.

Such research would need to be very well coordinated to reach common definitions of the problem, achieve effective cooperation with platforms, who hold crucial data, and produce coherent policy recommendations. The



independent academic output and findings should serve as input to well-coordinated training programs for both public and private policymakers in the field of disinformation to realise its potential.

TAKE AWAY

► Given the importance of both effective and sustainable responses to disinformation well-coordinated academic research throughout Europe is essential.

► In particular, further action needs to be taken on the development of the European Centres for interdisciplinary and independent evidence-based research on problems of disinformation, as well as on the coordination of such research as advised by the HLEG.

► Also platforms need to take further action in this context by providing privacy-compliant access to data for the study of disinformation dynamics by academics.

► The independent academic output and findings should serve as input to well-coordinated training programs for both public and private policymakers.

III. Conclusion

Huge progress has been made on these issues within the EU over the last year. After the HLEG has published its report in March 2018, the European Commission came in April with its Communication with policy initiatives largely based on this report. In December 2018, the European Commission and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy presented the 'Action Plan against Disinformation' setting out measures to tackle disinformation in Europe and beyond. In January 2019 the European Commission published the first reports submitted by signatories of the Code of Practice against disinformation of October 2018. While the Commission welcomed the progress made, it also calls on sig-



natories to intensify their efforts in the run up to the 2019 EU elections.

Further, while most of the report by the HLEG has been followed up on, some elements are not up to full speed yet. In particular, further action needs to be taken on the development of the European Centres for interdisciplinary and independent evidence-based research on problems of disinformation, as well as on the coordination of such research. Also platforms need to take action in this context by providing privacy-compliant access to data for the study of disinformation dynamics by academics.¹⁰

Further action is also required in the sphere of media pluralism as well as with regard to media and information literacy. While media pluralism remains one of the strongest weapons against disinformation as it creates societal resilience and dilutes disinformation with fact checked information, in many EU countries pluralism is under threat, and more action is required to protect it.

Recommendations

1. Strengthening societal resilience is the only truly future-proof way to counter disinformation while **maintaining fundamental rights**, including through fact-checking, media- and information literacy for young and old, media pluralism and the contribution of academic institutes as independent agents well positioned to foster balanced multi-dimensional and sustainable approaches.
2. **MIL efforts** require a cross-cutting approach and greater investment and coordination furthering digital skills, diverse news consumption and critical thinking whilst avoiding a general feeling of distrust. The new AVMSD provides a golden opportunity to advance MIL also by giving regulatory authorities a coordination role.
3. While **media pluralism** remains one of the strongest weapons against disinformation as it creates societal resilience and dilutes disinformation with fact checked information, pluralism is under threat and more action is required to protect it. To this end European wide monitoring of pluralism is essential, as well as further steps to create a (regulatory) level playing field and the development of new business models in the sector, including attractive alternative algorithms to the filter bubble and impartial delivery by platforms.
4. Given the importance of both effective and sustainable responses to disinformation well-coordinated **academic research** throughout Europe is essential. In particular, further action needs to be taken on the development of the European Centres for interdisciplinary and independent evidence-based research on problems of disinformation, as well as on the coordination of such research as advised by the HLEG. Also platforms need to take further action in this context by providing privacy-compliant access to data for the study of disinformation dynamics by academics. The independent academic output and findings should serve as input to well-coordinated training programs for both public and private policymakers.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/measuring-reach-fake-news-and-onlinedisinformation-europe>
- 2 The Report of the High Level Expert Group to the EU Commission on Fake News and online disinformation and the Commission Communication on Tackling online disinformation: a European approach, make clear that platforms have a responsibility to take all possible relevant and effective measures.
- 3 <https://www.klicksafe.de/>
- 4 <https://www.media-scout.de/infos-zum-media-scout-projekt-2/>
- 5 <https://www.bemediasmart.ie/>
- 6 <https://www.facebook.com/help/188118808357379>
- 7 <https://www.facebook.com/facebookmedia/blog/introducing-the-facebook-journalism-project>
- 8 <https://socialscience.one>
- 9 https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active_status=all&ad_type=political_and_issue_ads&country=ALL
- 10 Report of the High Level Expert Group to the EU Commission on Fake News and online disinformation, 2018, 25.

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