



Online Disinformation: Finding the silver bullet in the digital world

12th November 2019

European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)

2 Rue Van Maerlant, Room VMA3, Bâtiment Van Maerlant, 1000 Brussels

-REPORT-

The conference was organised with the support of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)



Comité économique et social européen
European Economic and Social Committee

ECAS's conference *"Online Disinformation: Finding the silver bullet in the digital world"*, organised in partnership with the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), focused on exploring possible solutions to countering online disinformation, from potential regulatory approaches to efficient initiatives and actions to empower citizens. The event took place on 12 November 2019 and discussed with distinguished speakers and an engaged audience if there is a silver bullet capable of building the necessary resilience in our society to ensure a prosperous, safe and democratic digital future for European citizens.



As the event was held in the framework of the [SMARTeD project](#)¹, under the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union (EU), the project's findings and results were also presented and discussed.

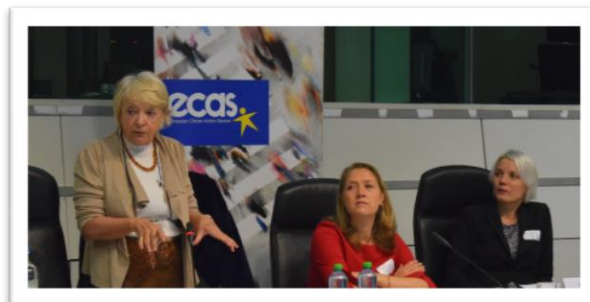
Around 70 participants took part in the conference, which was also livestreamed and viewed by over 300 people online.

Keynote Speech and introductory remarks

Jane Morrice, Member of the European Economic and Social Committee and former EESC vice-president responsible for communication, opened the conference with a direct example of the influence disinformation can have. Coming from Northern Ireland, she underlined the massive role disinformation played during the Brexit campaign and explained how this case best exemplifies the upcoming debate of the conference. Drawing from her personal experience as a

¹ The aim of the project is to foster European citizenship and improve conditions for civic and democratic participation at EU level by raising citizens' awareness of national and EU level initiatives to counter fake news and online disinformation.

journalist and politician, she claimed that disinformation has always been present in political campaigns and urged us to call it out. In this regard, she believes the European Union should be a lot more proactive, not only in fighting online disinformation, but also in presenting all the positive projects and initiatives that it undertakes in that direction.



Delphine Colard, Acting Head of Spokesperson's Unit and Deputy spokesperson of the European Parliament, continued the narrative on the importance for the EU institutions to give a solid and coordinated response beyond electoral periods and extend its cooperation to other partners, such as NGOs, in order to properly tackle disinformation. She then warned against the risks of the propagation of false and twisted information that is created with the intention to harm, polarise and discourage political participation.



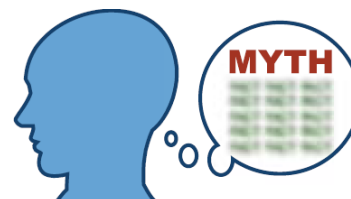
"What is concerning are the objectives that lie behind disinformation campaigns. They might seem unarmful at first sight, but they are tailored to increase polarisation, discourage democratic participation and foster extremism."

Delphine Colard



She shared that the European Parliament would like to see disinformation as a central EU foreign policy objective, including the issue of political meddling. The EP also aims at the internalisation of the issue through a set of actions covering areas such as the protection of citizens' privacy, the support of experts' work, including the StratCom Taskforce, and the undertaking of research looking into new technologies and new forms of disinformation (Deep Fakes, direct

private messaging or TextingStories). She concluded by underlining that until now, 'identification and exposure' have been considered as the best answers against disinformation. However, countering disinformation has its limits and can even generate risks of backfire. For these reasons, Ms Colard brought forward the importance of collaborating on positive communication on EU actions (eg. App 'What the EU does for you?' or 'Info Interrail for 18 years old'), awareness raising and education on media literacy.



Anneli Ahonen, Head of East Stratcom Task Force, presented the reasons that led to the creation of an EU response to the challenge of disinformation and the threat that Russia poses for its Eastern Neighbourhood. Since the team was set up in 2015, the EU has intensified its efforts to counter disinformation on the grounds of security motives.

The East Stratcom Task Force threefold objectives are, according to Ms. Ahonen, reflecting of the whole discussion around disinformation. Firstly, she confessed that the EU is not the best communicator and that the Task Force's key priority is to improve the EU's own communication in the Eastern partnership. The second objective is to support independent and strong media in this region. The third objective focuses on calling out the actors and inform them about the causes and consequences of today's



information space. The Task Force actions consist of exposing ongoing disinformation campaigns affecting the European Union and countries in the Eastern neighbourhood through their social media channels and website (EUvsdisinfo.eu), which currently comprises around 7,000 samples of pro-Kremlin disinformation messages. Finally, she discussed the difficulty to measure the impact of disinformation. Using the case of a Russian disinformation campaign against Finland as an example, she insisted it is important for people to realise that anybody can be a potential target of a disinformation campaign.

Panel 1: How far-reaching is regulation?

During the first panel, moderated by **Assya Kavrakova**, Executive Director of the European Citizen Action Service (ECAS), speakers representing the positions of different stakeholders debated over possible approaches to tackle online disinformation. The moderator 'challenged' the speakers on the pros and cons of a possible regulatory approach, taking stock of the achievements and results of measures implemented so far.



Alberto Rabbachin, Policy Officer working on media convergence and social media within DG CONNECT at the European Commission, presented the main findings of the first assessment of the Code of Practice and other implemented measures and discussed the potential of a self-regulatory approach to address the issue of disinformation. He emphasised how online disinformation is a multifaceted and fast-changing phenomenon that results from the recent drastic changes in the media ecosystem.

Due to the need of a rapid response, the EU opted for a self-regulatory approach and introduced a Code of Practice (CoP) as part of the third pillar of the European Action Plan on Disinformation. This CoP is based on five different elements: Improving the scrutiny of ad placements; Enhancing the transparency of political advertising; Strengthening the integrity of services; Empowering consumers; Enabling independent research. While Mr. Rabbachin welcomed the success of this self-regulatory approach on the basis of platforms' self-assessment reports, he admitted that there is room for



improvements in a number of areas. These include the access for public authorities and researchers to relevant data for an adequate and independent assessment of the impact of the CoP, the non-compliance with the CoP of a number of platforms and the absence of empowering tools for consumers. He explained that further discussions on the possibility to adopt a regulatory approach in the future will take place under the next Commission, based on the final assessment of the Code of Practice that will be unveiled in January. Finally, he underlined how the EU also worked on awareness raising and strengthening of societal resilience to disinformation by investing in media literacy actions and in research and innovation.

Maud Sacquet, EU Public Policy Manager at Mozilla, presented the role and involvement of Mozilla in the fight against online disinformation. Mozilla is mostly known for its Firefox Web browser software and henceforth, is not in itself a platform hosting content. However, the promotion of a shared knowledge and verifiable facts on the internet has become a major commitment of the company. Mozilla notably took part in a high-level expert group on disinformation and signed the Code of Practice.



“Any products that Mozilla develops and any advocacy campaign that its runs complies with its Manifesto that says Mozilla is committed to an internet that promotes a shared knowledge and verifiable facts”.

Maud Sacquet

One major area of concern of the open-source software community was targeted advertising. In order to face this issue, Mozilla rolled out a new version of Firefox, which by default blocks third-party known tracking cookies. Since July 2019, the new version of Firefox blocked more than 450 billion tracking requests online. Furthermore, the Mozilla Foundation attempted to act on the promotion of transparency in accordance with the second pillar of the CoP. The company made



sure the platform's archives were working, in order for public authorities to adequately access the data (on political advertising on social networks). While Mozilla's commitment is clear, there is room for improvement. Based on Mozilla CoP assessment, Ms. Sacquet listed existing issues, such as missing data of targeting, the lack of protection and tools against online tracking and the transparency of political ads. Finally, she noted that even the business-model of the platforms triggers the creation of

disinformation in promoting sensational content for 'clicks and views'.

Clara Hanot, Advocacy and Fundraising Officer at EU DisinfoLab, presented the role of the organisation in analysing disinformation campaigns in the EU. She affirmed that EU DisinfoLab works not only to ensure the elaboration of relevant recommendations for policy-makers, but also serves as a hub to gather the research and civil society organisations interested in this issue.



She described their latest research to demonstrate how the lack of transparency is currently a major issue for online platforms, not only in terms of the pages' ownership but also in terms of automated content. On Facebook, EU DisinfoLab uncovered a whole network of white supremacist in France propagating racist and supremacist agenda and theories. In total, 16 pages of this kind, with an estimated reach of 375 000 people, all related to one organisational source, were revealed. When considering regulation, she noted that actions taken by the different platforms under the Code of

Practice are not sufficient. In her view, behind the numbers delivered by the platforms, actual transparency and cooperation between stakeholders are lacking. Moreover, she declared that there is an absolute need to develop harmonised EU definitions, to ensure proper implementation and to hold users accountable for published content if we want to adequately tackle online misleading information and hateful content.

Elisabetta Biasin, Legal Researcher at the KU Leuven Centre for IT & IP Law (CiTiP), presented the legal research she conducted on the topic of privacy and data protection. She first warned the audience about the complexity of the question of disinformation, which impacts a variety of fundamental rights, values and frameworks.

She then focused on the specific question of privacy and data protection in electoral campaigns. She defined the concept of 'online shift' in political campaigning to explain how the use of data in elections has become a major factor, leading political parties to target individual voters with messages based on their interests and values. These recent developments raise questions on the legality and ethic of voters' personal data processing. Moreover, the issue of micro-targeting and



citizens. She concluded that this eventually results in tensions regarding data subjects' rights, transparency and freedom of expression.

Elena Gozun, Affiliated expert at Europuls-Centre of European Expertise, explained to the audience Europuls's vision of the appropriate ways to tackle disinformation and to integrate citizens in this fight. She presented the 'Fake News Project' carried out by the Romanian think-tank in the Republic of Moldova. Under this project, Europuls launched an app for mobile phones that allows users to be informed and distinguish factual from fake news, in a new and intuitive interface. Through a notification, every user can access a detailed debunk, along with visuals ridiculing the lies, using caricatures, memes or gifs. As she explained, this ensures that users directly receive an update on disinformation with the help of a 'self-explanatory' picture. Regarding the issue itself, she recognised a number of challenges ahead, such as the digital divide, especially with regard to the old generation, or the problematic of confirmation bias.



"If we target more the users and educate them better on how to be a filter on their own before sharing, before spreading, before believing, we will manage to tackle much better and in a more comprehensive way."

Elena Gozun

In view of this challenge, she called for the promotion and investment in civic education, critical thinking and media literacy, in collaboration with Ministries of Education, and for the coordination and communication of positive local actions against disinformation at EU level. Finally, she underlined how the fight against disinformation is not so much about fast answers and strategies

targeting the platforms but rather a long-term approach focusing on users, giving them the tools to become a filter of their own.

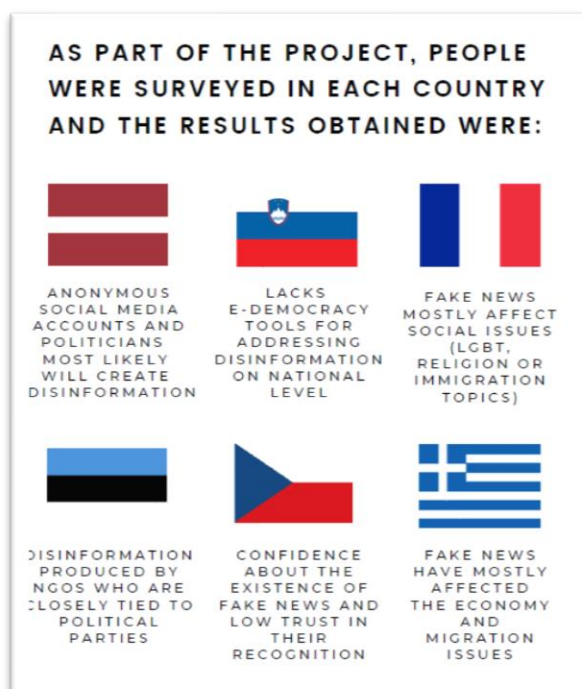
Panel 2: Empowering citizens to counter online disinformation through knowledge, digital skills and actions

During the second panel, moderated by **Flavio Grazian**, European Democracy Coordinator of European Citizen Action Service (ECAS), speakers explored diverse initiatives and actions that could empower citizens to counter online disinformation and hence, be valuable for building the necessary resilience for the future of our democratic digital societies.



Annija Emersone, Senior Project Manager of ManaBalss, started the discussion by presenting the SMARTeD project and its results and recommendations.

In the initial phase of the SMARTeD project, partners carried out research and created an online 'expert survey' on disinformation and fake news encompassing 48 participants (including academia, civil society activists, journalists and researchers) from six different Member States. Through it, participants identified actions to be taken to address the issue of disinformation in their countries. She explained that the main part of the SMARTeD project concerned the development of a methodology for local workshops targeting young people and NGOs in rural areas in the project's countries. The workshops aimed at raising awareness on the issue and at providing participants with the necessary skills to face online disinformation in their daily life. As a result of these workshops, participants



produced a number of recommendations for EU and national policy makers. These encompassed six dimensions: Policy and funding; Accountability; Responsible media; Encouraging cooperation; Education; Tech tools. She concluded by highlighting how raising awareness among the public was considered to be the most effective measure to address disinformation.

Thomas Myrup Kristensen, Managing Director, EU Affairs & Head, Facebook, presented Facebook's approach to helping users access verified information and gave an overview of the different actions taken to ensure that citizens develop the necessary skills to navigate the online world. He reaffirmed Facebook's responsibility and interest in providing an online platform that contains meaningful and trustworthy content, allowing users to take part in an authentic debate that can help them make informed decisions. However, he also emphasised how online disinformation is an overly complex and vast issue that cannot be tackled in a single way.



"There is no one single solution to this issue because we are talking about a very complex issue."

Thomas Myrup Kristensen



To address the issue, Facebook uses an approach based on three pillars: 'Reduce, Remove and Inform'. Regarding the removal of fake accounts, Facebook has invested large resources and uses artificial intelligence to remove them from the platform. On average, between one and two billion fake or stolen accounts are removed in a quarter of a year. When it comes to reducing and informing, Facebook hired more than 40 fact-checkers

covering more than 20 different languages and countries. While he considers the provision of trustworthy information to users crucial, he acknowledges that educating people in digital skills is equally important. In this respect, much needs to be done in collaboration with experts across Europe and Facebook is currently undertaking a series of actions in this respect.

Regarding the removal of non-factual content, he underlined that this remains a very controversial issue, especially with regard to political advertising. Apart from specific cases that can have a real impact on people's life, such as anti-vaccines campaigns, Facebook refuses to take an overly harsh stance on this issue. Instead, Facebook calls for finding the appropriate balance in providing people with choices in their consumption and production of information.

Vladimír Bilčík, Member of the European Parliament from the EPP Group, discussed the role of the European Parliament in ensuring access to verified information for European citizens. He remarked that the new European Parliament took the issue of online disinformation at a very

early stage of its mandate. This resulted in the adoption of a Resolution last month and the question of online disinformation was also posed in the public hearings of a number of Commissioners in the previous weeks, notably in the field of justice and home affairs and of foreign security.

“Responsible spread of information has become an increasingly salient political issue and if there is one big change that we might find in comparison with the previous European Parliament, is that this political salience is only going to rise”.

MEP Vladimír Bilčík

As one of the co-authors of the Resolution, Mr. Bilčík expressed his satisfaction with the large support it received. Nevertheless, he considers that there is still a lot to be done on the issue of disinformation. Addressing the active spread of falsehood is a politically salient issue that entails an important public dimension. On this ground, he listed several points in which the



European Parliament could help citizens access verified information. He highlighted how the issue needs to be dealt at the highest political level using a multi-stakeholder approach. Furthermore, the new media operating in the digital sphere has to take responsibility, making sure information is based on scientific and verifiable facts. In his view, there is a need to take legislative action at the EU level, which detains a much bigger bargaining power in comparison with small European countries against the online platforms. Self-regulation is not sufficient, and instruments as the Code of Practice do not engage with online platforms and new media in a way that ensures the protection of the European public sphere, as well as European and citizens' interests.



Adeline Brion, Programme Coordinator in Belgium of Lie Detectors, presented the main findings of the organisation's recent study and outlined the role of civil society in empowering citizens to counter online disinformation.

She noted that disinformation is an insidious issue spreading on several platforms used mostly by young people. In her view, fact-checking must be combined with media literacy training to ensure long-term

results. Giving journalists the opportunity to train young people is the best approach to create a relation of trust and help citizens understand the information they access in the digital world. Moreover, she considers it to be essential to target young audiences, which are very affected by the problem. Kids have an instinctive understanding of the digital world, but it is important to equip them with the necessary skills to read information online and possibly decipher manipulations.

For this reason, Lie Detectors is currently running a media literacy project that aims at starting a conversation with kids aged 12-15. Concretely, it selects and trains accredited journalists to go into classrooms in Europe to talk about disinformation and about professional journalism in interactive sessions. Finally, she remarked that Lie Detectors is carrying out high-level advocacy work, calling for media and news literacy to become a fundamental part of teacher training curricula, as she considers this a key element to address the issue of online disinformation.



Heritiana Ranaivoson, Senior Researcher at imec-SMIT-VUB, explored the role of civil society in building a more resilient digital society and highlighted a number of good practices based on previous researches. According to his analysis, the media landscape has experienced two different trends lately: diversity and concentration. On the one hand, it is nowadays

easier to produce and distribute content which results in the availability of a very large amount of diffuse and diverging information. On the other hand, concentration in media usage and distribution causes problems such as ‘filter bubbles’ limiting access to information. In the face of this evolution, he suggested different short-term and long-term silver bullets to the problem, from fact-checking and the application of the “follow the money” principle to awareness raising, investment in media research and innovation and transparency.



“We need to go broader than the question of disinformation, we need to put more money into media research and innovation because qualitative media is crucial for our economy, democracy and needs to be sustainable”.

Heritiana Ranaivoson

He also identified a series of good practices addressing online disinformation, mentioning ‘The Guardian’ as a good reference from a media perspective, reconciling economic sustainability and content quality. He concluded with the importance of increasing media research and innovation to ensure the sustainability of our democracy in the digital world.

Finally, **Imants Breidaks**, CEO of ManaBalss brought the conference to a close with a reflection on the threat that online disinformation represents for our democracy. He pointed to the fact that freedom of speech is being successfully used by actors with obscure motivations, to attack and deconstruct democracy and the rule of law throughout the Western world. As people are pushed towards a substantial change in accessing information online, more efforts have to be made to defend democratic values and the rule of law to ensure sustainability.



The full livestream of the event can be viewed [here](#) (first panel) and [here](#) (second panel).



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Agenda

9.00 – 9.30	Registration
9.30 – 9.50	Introductory remarks and keynote speech <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Jane Morrice, Member of the European Economic and Social Committee and former vice-president responsible for communication▪ Delphine Colard, Acting Head of Spokesperson's Unit and Deputy spokesperson, European Parliament▪ Anneli Ahonen, Head of the East Stratcom Taskforce, European External Action Service
9.50 – 11.15	Panel 1: <i>How far-reaching is regulation?</i> Moderator: Assya Kavrakova , Executive Director, European Citizen Action Service (ECAS) <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Alberto Rabbachin, Scientific Programme Officer, Unit I4, DG Connect, European Commission▪ Maud Sacquet, Public Policy Manager, Mozilla▪ Clara Hanot, Advocacy and Fundraising Officer, EU DisinfoLab▪ Elisabetta Biasin, Legal Researcher, KU Leuven Centre for IT & IP Law▪ Elena Gozun, Affiliated Expert - Disinformation and Fake News, Europuls
11.15 – 11.30	Coffee break
11.30 – 12.50	Panel 2: <i>Empowering citizens to counter online disinformation through knowledge, digital skills and actions</i> Moderator: Flavio Grazian , European Democracy Coordinator, European Citizen Action Service, (ECAS) <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Vladimír Bilčík, Member of the European Parliament, EPP Group▪ Thomas Myrup Kristensen, Managing Director, EU Affairs & Head, Brussels Office, Facebook▪ Adeline Brion, Acting Project Director and Programme Coordinator in Belgium, Lie Detectors▪ Annija Emerson, Senior Project Manager, ManaBalss▪ Heritiana Ranaivoson, Senior Researcher, imec-SMIT-VUB
12.50 – 13.00	Concluding remarks
13.00 – 14.00	Lunch

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