

# COMING TOGETHER TO FIGHT FAKE NEWS: LESSONS FROM THE EUROPEAN APPROACH TO DISINFORMATION

BY ANNINA CLAEISSON

For observers across the pond, Europe has been a testing ground for tactics to counter disinformation in democracies. Over the course of many national elections in the past few years, Europe has tried a variety of measures to counter disinformation efforts from multiple sources. Now, the European Union is aiming to complement national efforts by scaling up its own response through EU-level policies.

In an effort to address what some civil society and media organizations have criticized as an overly disaggregated approach by the European Union, current EU efforts focus on proper coordination with and among the many actors involved in countering disinformation. Specifically, the EU response is focused on three lines of effort: improving interagency and international cooperation; stepping up ambitions

in addressing the role of the private sector; and instituting a plan to support media literacy. In addition to helping the European Union tackle disinformation campaigns that seek to disrupt the democratic process, these measures can also serve as a template for the United States and other countries as they design their own anti-disinformation strategies.

## STRENGTHENING INTERAGENCY AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

The problem of disinformation is a complex and disaggregated one. While the United States often sees disinformation narrowly as the dissemination of “fake news” by Russian trolls, the “European approach” often takes a wider view.<sup>1</sup> In its recent communications, the European Union presents disinformation as a problem rooted in complex and rapid socioeconomic changes. Our democracies are now characterized by stark societal divisions that malign actors may seek to exploit. While this is nothing new, technological developments have made disinformation a powerful, inexpensive, and often profitable method of influencing a range of actors from powerful states to small extremist groups. State-sponsored Russian campaigns in particular have become a mounting threat to European democracies and remain a significant challenge ahead of the 2019 European parliament elections, but other groups (such as those on the far-right) have also been active in disinformation campaigns in recent European elections.<sup>2,3</sup>

Since disinformation is a problem with diverse and complicated roots, the challenge of countering it does not land in any one portfolio. It requires cooperation

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between different agencies within states and internationally. As an important co-regulatory actor, this is where the European Union has a vital role to play. Over the course of 2018, the European Union has stepped up its ambitions in countering disinformation campaigns through a range of new initiatives.

There are several positive lessons to draw from these. Perhaps most importantly, the European Commission has appropriately identified the need for a unified, multi-stakeholder response to disinformation, including participation from governments, civil society, and the private sector.<sup>4</sup> The commission's most recent action plan, released in December 2018, sets out important improvements in this regard. The EU budget for tackling disinformation is expected to more than double in 2019, going from €1.9 million

in 2018 to €5 million.<sup>5</sup> This is not to be disregarded—money matters a great deal, especially when Russia invests over €1 billion each year into their disinformation and propaganda efforts.<sup>6</sup>

The action plan's most concrete new step is the creation of a rapid alert system, which provides alerts on new disinformation campaigns as they emerge in real time.<sup>7</sup> This mechanism is set to involve NATO and could become a promising tool for intelligence and data sharing across borders. This action plan also strengthens previously under-resourced tools such as the East Strategic Communication Task Force, an issue which was identified by experts as a significant roadblock to improving anti-disinformation efforts in the European Union.<sup>8</sup>

Despite these and other improvements to the European Union's overall strategy, managing a multi-stakeholder response without losing oversight and control of policy efforts remains a difficult balancing act. The European Union's current track record shows a tendency to over rely on "outsourcing" anti-disinformation efforts to independent networks. The EU vs Disinfo campaign, part of the East Strategic Communication Task Force, has so far provided the starkest example of these shortcomings.<sup>9</sup> The campaign runs through a volunteer "myth-busting" network of more than 400 experts, journalists, government officials, NGOs, and think tanks. However, only around a dozen of these appear to be active.<sup>10</sup> The campaign came under fire when three legitimate Dutch publications had to go to court in order to be removed from the campaign's black list.<sup>11</sup>

Relying on networks of “fact-checkers” may sound like a simple solution to countering the spread of false information, but this strategy has several problems. Conflicts of interest risk complicating these collaborations. Parties and leaders who have benefited from the proliferation of false narratives (such as the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban) have little incentive to invest in higher journalistic standards or fact-checking. Nor do private actors have much incentive to prioritize the truth over profit margins, a prerequisite for effectively participating in such initiatives. It is crucial to strike a balance between involving a wide variety of actors and maintaining accountability for such efforts to galvanize appropriate levels of political leverage for countering disinformation.

## ADDRESSING THE PRIVATE SECTOR

The private sector has a role to play in this regard. Private actors are the ones running the online platforms where disinformation campaigns launch and spread. Algorithm-based, advertising-driven social media dynamics have served as a key facilitator of amplified dissemination of false messages.<sup>12</sup> The European Union has explicitly acknowledged the failure of private-sector actors to address this issue and has urged private corporations to step up their efforts through a series of initiatives over the past year.

The EU Code of Practice on Disinformation, published on September 26, 2018, covers five areas of competence to increase transparency and accountability of the online media landscape.<sup>13</sup> The code’s publication marked the first time worldwide that industry (including tech giants such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter) agreed on a voluntary basis to sign up for regulatory standards for the purposes of reducing false information spread online. To complement the code, the European Union’s action plan introduced a monitoring body to oversee the implementation of the code’s commitments.<sup>14</sup>

This last step is vital but could be developed further. The voluntary and self-regulatory code of practice lacks teeth if it is not complemented by other measures to improve scrutiny of private actors. However, the business models of many online platforms favor manipulative content that can spread rapidly on a wide scale, a key driver of disinformation campaigns. When it comes to the business models of online platforms, the European Data Protection Supervisor rightly points out that “fake news is a symptom of concentrated, unaccountable digital markets, and constant tracking and reckless handling of personal data.”<sup>15</sup>

The EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which came into force in 2018, remains one of the strongest data protection regulation systems in the world. Through it, the European Union has elevated data privacy into the realm of individual rights and created some guarantees for the processing of personal data, particularly during electoral activities.<sup>16</sup> Preventing the misuse of personal data is another important tool for combating disinformation campaigns. While the European Commission has previously acknowledged the role of GDPR and similar initiatives (such as ePrivacy) in the context of disinformation, there is no

mention of these mechanisms in the European Union’s recent Action Plan.<sup>17, 18</sup> Without a plan to enforce these measures as part of wider disinformation efforts, illegal data collection for illicit use remains a risk factor and key weakness of the new EU strategy.

## STRENGTHENING MEDIA LITERACY

Perhaps most importantly, the European Union’s new initiatives show an understanding that you cannot fight disinformation by cutting off the “heads of the hydra” one at a time. A more sustainable policy must involve a sustained effort to promote positive counter-messages (for example, on the benefits of EU membership or multiculturalism) that can compete with false and divisive content. These measures focus on solutions from the demand-side rather than the supply-side, building resilience to disinformation campaigns from the bottom up.<sup>19</sup>

The latest action plan calls on member states to intensify proactive and objective communications to provide positive counter-narratives to disinformation campaigns. These measures have often been recommended from state and civil society actors as a crucial part of a successful strategy to counter disinformation, and it is a positive sign that the European Union has incorporated such tactics into its strategy. The goal is not just to disseminate counter-propaganda but rather to consistently communicate facts in an approachable way in order to build up a resilient “other side of the story” that citizens should understand before encountering false information. Crucially, this should not be the sole job of EU institutions or national governments but must also involve civil society and independent media.<sup>20, 21</sup>

Improving media literacy—strengthening critical attitudes among citizens towards different sources of news—is another vital tool for an effective anti-disinformation strategy. This is evident from countries like Ukraine that have long been subjected to heavy disinformation and propaganda campaigns on behalf of the Russian state and have since implemented successful national education plans for media literacy. Evidence from these states show that media literacy programs are particularly effective when they are not limited to young people but target all citizens in different sectors of society, including media professionals.<sup>22</sup> The European Union and the United States can go even further in strengthening media literacy education in all sectors of society.

## LESSONS BEYOND EUROPE

Reviewing the European Union’s new initiatives provides several positive lessons on how to design policy responses to disinformation that go beyond tech. Due to the rapid development of the technology behind disinformation campaigns, there remains a significant risk that the European Union’s response will lag behind the latest tools. Disinformation has a social dimension as well as a technological one, and any effective policy must take a holistic approach. In 2018, the European Union took many important steps in this regard. Through improved interagency coordination, measures to regulate the private sector, and support for

media literacy, the European Union is now on a path to build resilience against disinformation ahead of the 2019 elections.

That is not to say that there is not room for improvement. The mixed success of the EU vs Disinfo campaign illustrates the difficult balance between involving a diverse network of stakeholders and “outsourcing” information defense operations to the point where they become unreliable. Rigorous monitoring and evaluation is crucial as a part of the process of improving cooperation between sectors. Civil society has already provided counsel to the European Union in this regard: civil society should be directly involved in monitoring and evaluation in order to improve accountability.

Reviewing the European Union’s policies provides an opportunity for countries like the United States to draw lessons to inform their own multi-stakeholder strategies to counter disinformation. While the United States does not operate under the same legal framework as the European Union, the logic behind the European Union’s raised ambitions to counter disinformation should certainly still apply across the pond. Perhaps most importantly, the “European approach” highlights the necessity and difficulty of involving all parts of society in this fight. In 2018, the European Union has made landmark progress particularly in addressing the private sector and protecting personal data. The effectiveness of measures such as GDPR and the Code of Practice must be carefully evaluated both within and outside of the European Union. The United States would greatly benefit from reviewing the results of such an analysis to inform future policy conversations about whether to implement similar measures.

The disinformation challenge has always changed with the times and will continue to do so. Learning from each other—on an interagency or transatlantic basis—remains the best way of staying ready to counter it.

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## ENDNOTES

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