

The European Union's Fight Against Disinformation

WRITTEN BY ANNABELLE BOURDAS

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Disinformation is not a new phenomenon, however, digital communications have changed the speed at which information travels. The easiness with which false information can be spread has made the European Union (EU) vulnerable during the Covid-19 pandemic. Since then, the EU has taken steps to respond to these challenges. Nonetheless, the EU should continue its efforts as the war in Ukraine has exacerbated the fact that disinformation can be a threat to democracies. The European External Action Service (EEAS) has claimed that disinformation is now a security problem. Disinformation can be used to attack the EU's image and legitimacy.

The EU's official definition of disinformation is "false or misleading content that is spread to deceive or secure economic or political gain, and which may cause public harm." (European Commission, 2022). Disinformation has to be differentiated from 'fake news' and misinformation which is "false or misleading content shared without harmful intent though the effects can be still harmful." (European Commission, 2022).

However, there is no consensus on the definition of disinformation. Member States have different interpretations of what disinformation entails due to their political priorities and culture. This is problematic regarding the freedom of speech, as some Member States are more favourable to limiting it to prevent the effects of disinformation campaigns. The EU is thus in a delicate position to draft regulations regarding democratic values.

The EU has acknowledged disinformation as a serious threat and has thus taken measures to fight against it. In 2015, the EU equipped the EEAS with the East StratCom Task Force to fight against Russian disinformation campaigns. Subsequently, the EU created two additional task forces: The Western Balkans Task Force and the Task Force South for the countries of the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. During the pandemic, public reports regarding Covid-19 disinformation were published by the EEAS Stratcom Division, covering information manipulation and interference by Russia, China and other actors (Pamment, 2020). It was highlighted that the EU had faced some limitations regarding disinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, disinformation campaigns have been facilitated during the pandemic as lockdowns have made people increase their screen time. Moreover, as there was little information available due to the unprecedented nature of the crisis, false information spread very fast. It made it easier for some actors to discredit official news channels, institutions and medical experts. Once the media ecosystem was made vulnerable and the legitimacy of institutions questioned, these actors took advantage of the population's overall chaos and sentiment of fear and anxiety to spread their message and fuel conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories thrive in a time of crisis and confusion as they provide people with a feeling of comfort in times of uncertainty. And as the news cycle is constant, being maintained by social media, people are fed with all kinds of information, making conspiracy theories appealing because of the feeling they convey rather than their factual value (Vériter et al., 2020).

The high levels of information spread daily make it hard for the EU to monitor and detect false information. Public authorities face a dilemma by trying to not restrain too much the freedom of speech while at the same time cease the diffusion of disinformation. It is also worth mentioning that it can be conflictual for public authorities to expose false information as it also promotes conspiracy theories and amplifies their message. As they are based on emotions rather than facts, exposing them does not necessarily stop people from embracing them.

In the same way, social media rely on emotions to attract clicks and generate traffic on their platforms. Their business model is based on the addictiveness of their content. The virality of news then depends on the emotion it conveys. Hence, emotions like fear, hatred and anger are the best to attract attention. As a result, social media are a great way to measure how a population feels in regard to specific themes. Online platforms can generate content that will attract their users based on the profile they have established of themselves. Algorithms select the content that will likely get a reaction from the users and then filter the platform to offer similar content and keep the user's attention for as long as possible. Consequently, this creates informational bubbles where users are spiralling in a web of content that will shape their ideology. Thus, social media can predict their users behaviour to some extent. Furthermore, by gathering data on their users, online platforms can monetise this information by helping actors to identify a targeted audience for various purposes - from selling products to influencing political elections (Bertrand, 2021). Hence, the EU needs to ensure that disinformation cannot be a source of revenue for online platforms. The EU has taken steps to ensure accountability of the latter as they are particularly effective in spreading disinformation due to their large array of mechanisms such as bots, trolls or automatic processes that amplify the reach of the actor's message rapidly and at a low cost. As social media have become one of the main vectors to spread disinformation, regulations are necessary.

As a result, the EU has developed a Code of Practice on Disinformation (COP) at the end of 2018. It is a self-regulatory tool that allows a collaborative process with online platforms as they can play a part in the disturbance of political and democratic processes. Facebook, Google and Microsoft for example have already taken part in this project. However, the revision of COP has been delayed due to the arrival of potential new signatories (Killeen, 2021). Since COP is not binding, it will be truly efficient only if third parties agree to be involved and commit to tackling disinformation. Nonetheless, the European Commission has hope to make some measures of COP mandatory by making it a co-regulatory instrument under the Digital Services Act (DSA) which aims at asserting control over online platforms (Killeen, 2020). Overall, the main goal of these regulations is to increase the monitoring of online platforms and enhance their transparency and accountability. Moreover, the EU has launched the Rapid Alert System in March 2019 to enable more coordination at the EU level and evaluate the situation of disinformation spreading across the Union (Pamment, 2020).

In conclusion, the EU has to assert its preparedness for disinformation campaigns by ensuring its cyber resilience. The Union has taken steps in creating a framework to tackle disinformation. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the limitations of the EU's regulations. As a result, the EU developed its arsenal of tools with the Digital Services Act for instance. Disinformation, as a hybrid threat, can be considered a genuine concern for the future of democratic processes as the war in Ukraine has shown. Disinformation campaigns and information warfare can have devastating effects on democratic institutions. In addition, with the rapid advancements of technological progress, it will become increasingly difficult to differentiate the real from the fake. For this reason, the EU has to maintain its efforts in the regulation of disinformation to ensure a coordinated response and prevent any attack on democratic values. "Any attempt to and intentionally undermine and manipulate public opinion, therefore, represents a grave threat to the Union itself." (European Court of Auditors, 2020).

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