

Article – Video: how to counter the power of misinformation

Social media – source of news for almost half of Europeans – has made the spreading of fake news easier and faster. With six out of ten news items now being shared without actually being read, members of the Parliament have added their voices to those concerned about the spread of disinformation, political propaganda and hate speech. Speaking in plenary on 5 April, they disagreed however on how best to respond to the problem. Watch our video above for an overview of the debate.

[Fake news](#) consists of deliberately fabricated stories posing as genuine journalism with the aim of manipulating readers. As old as the printing press, the phenomenon gained momentum during last year's presidential campaign in the United States, not least due to the growing use of social media as a source for news. In fact viral fake news received more [engagement](#) on Facebook than real news in the final three months of the 2016 campaign for the White House.

Fake news, for the most part, consists of “clickbait” and disinformation, content whose main purpose is to attract attention, generate traffic to a certain webpage and thereby gain revenue from advertising. It can also entail deceptive content created to undermine political opponents. Russia, for example, has been using disinformation in its ongoing [hybrid war](#) against Ukraine.

What can the EU do about fake news?

A plenary debate in Parliament on 5 April demonstrated that there is [no agreement](#) between members on how best to tackle the proliferation of hate speech and fake news online. Some members such as Tanja Fajon (S&D, Slovenia) called for fines to be imposed on those who fail to eliminate fake news or illegal content, whereas others including Andrew Lewer (ECR, UK) questioned “who determines what hate speech is?”

A number of members vigorously criticised any moves to gag the internet, silence dissenting political opinion and create Orwellian “ministries of truth”. “Censorship is not an alternative when we're trying to make the rule of law meaningful online,” asserted Dutch ALDE member Marietje Schaake. She also pointed out however: “I am not reassured when Silicon Valley or Mark Zuckerberg are the de-facto designers of our realities or of our truths.”

German EPP member Monika Hohlmeier also spoke in favour of fighting fake news with appropriate legislation: “We do have freedom of opinion, but you don't have alternative facts, you just have facts. It's essential that we take legal measures at the EU level so that we can react effectively.”

However, Martina Michels (GUE/NGL, Germany) described it as naive to believe that the problem of fake news could disappear with regulation: “If you take a

look at the causes of populism and hate speech, they are not on the internet. They are found within society itself and it is the climate in society that we will have to change.”

Julia Reda (Greens/EFA, Germany) was also sceptical: “No technology is qualified to make the difficult decision needed to qualify hate speech. By relying solely on technology, we are not helping the victims and we are silencing free speech.” She called for more investment in law enforcement regarding hate speech and spoke of the need to make it easier to report online hate crimes.

Watch our video above for more.