

Tackling online disinformation

Why is the Commission proposing a Communication on online disinformation?

While technologies offer new and easy ways, notably through social media, to disseminate information on a large scale and with speed and precision, they can also be used as powerful echo chambers for disinformation campaigns.

Disinformation erodes trust in institutions and in digital and traditional media and harms our democracies by hampering the ability of citizens to take informed decisions. It can polarise debates, create or deepen tensions in society and undermine electoral systems, and thus have a wider impact on European security. It impairs freedom of opinion and expression, a fundamental right enshrined in the [Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union](#). Freedom of expression encompasses respect for media freedom and pluralism, as well as the right of citizens to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas “without interference by public authorities and regardless of frontiers”. However, public authorities have a duty to make citizens aware of and protect them against activities aimed at deliberately manipulating their views and covertly influencing their decisions.

The rise of disinformation and the gravity of the threat have sparked growing awareness and concerns in civil society, both in EU Member States and internationally. [In a June 2017 Resolution](#), the European Parliament called upon the Commission “to analyse in depth the current situation and legal framework with regard to fake news and to verify the possibility of legislative intervention to limit the dissemination and spreading of fake content.”

That is why the Commission is today proposing a series of measures and self-regulatory tools, such as an EU-wide Code of Practice on Disinformation with the objective of producing measurable effects by October 2018. It also proposes to enhance media literacy, and support of an independent network of fact-checkers and tools to stimulate quality journalism.

What does the Commission expect from social media and online platforms?

There are growing expectations that online platforms should not only comply with legal obligations under EU and national law, but also act with appropriate responsibility, given their central role, so as to ensure a safe online environment, protect users from disinformation, and offer users exposure to different views.

The Commission calls upon platforms to decisively step up their efforts to tackle online disinformation. It considers that self-regulation, provided that it is effectively implemented and monitored, can contribute to these efforts. The latter should not lead to any harmful consequences for the technical functioning of the internet, and internet fragmentation should be avoided.

To this end, the Commission will support the development of an ambitious Code of Practice aiming to achieve the following objectives:

- Significantly improve the scrutiny of advertisement placements notably in order to reduce revenues for purveyors of disinformation; and restrict targeting options for political advertising;
- Improve access to trustworthy information.
- Ensure transparency about sponsored content relating to electoral and policy-making processes;
- Intensify and demonstrate the effectiveness of efforts to close fake accounts;
- Facilitate users' assessment of content through indicators of the trustworthiness of content sources and provide easily accessible tools to report disinformation;
- Establish clear marking systems and rules for bots and ensure their activities cannot be confused with human interactions;
- Empower users with tools enabling a customized and interactive online experience so as to facilitate content discovery and access to different news sources representing alternative viewpoints;
- Ensure that new online services include safeguards against disinformation;
- Provide trusted fact-checking organisations and academia with privacy-compliant access to platform data (notably via application programming interfaces) to enable them to better analyse and monitor disinformation dynamics, and better understand the functioning of algorithms

What are the actions to limit the role of troll, bots, etc. which are actually responsible for the spread of fake news?

The Code of Practice should also cover bots by establishing clear marking systems and rules for bots and ensuring their activities cannot be confused with human interactions. Platforms are also expected to intensify and demonstrate the effectiveness of efforts to close fake accounts.

What will happen to online platforms and social networks that will not follow the suggested Code of Practice?

The Commission calls upon platforms to decisively step up their efforts to tackle online disinformation. To this end, the Commission will support the development of an ambitious Code of Practice of self-regulatory nature. The Commission will assess the implementation of the Code of Practice, in broad consultation with stakeholders and on the basis of key performance indicators. Should the results prove unsatisfactory, the Commission may propose further actions, including actions of a regulatory nature.

What is the Commission expecting from other players, such as traditional media?

The Communication proposes an inclusive approach where there is broad stakeholder involvement and the cooperation of public authorities, online platforms, advertisers, trusted flaggers, journalists and media groups.

Since many aspects of disinformation remain insufficiently analysed and access to online platforms' data is still limited, the Communication foresees additional data gathering, analysis and monitoring by fact-checkers and academic researchers.

On the other hand, it also recommends further media literacy activities by civil society and fact checkers.

It also recognises the need to take action to further support Europe's quality media in the digital environment, reinforce trust in the key societal and democratic role of quality journalism both offline and online, and encourage quality news media to explore innovative forms of journalism.

The Commission multi-stakeholder forum on disinformation to be convened will also provide a framework for efficient cooperation between relevant stakeholders, including online platforms, the advertising industry and major advertisers, media and civil society representatives, and will secure a commitment to coordinate and scale up efforts to tackle disinformation.

Why does the Commission think that self-regulation for online platforms is the right approach to tackle the issue?

Online disinformation is a new, multi-faceted and fast developing issue that requires immediate action. Therefore, self-regulation is considered the most appropriate way for online platforms to implement swift action to tackle this problem, in comparison to a regulatory approach that would take a long time to be prepared and implemented and might not cover all actors. The objective is for this self-regulatory effort to produce measurable effects by October 2018.

Should the self-regulatory approach fail, the Commission may propose further actions, including regulatory ones targeted at a few platforms. Such actions should in any case strictly respect freedom of expression.

Why does the Communication propose an Online Platform on Disinformation?

As a first step, the Commission will support the creation of an independent European network of fact-checkers to establish common working methods,

exchange best practices, achieve the broadest possible coverage across the EU, and participate in joint fact-checking and related activities.

As a second step, the Commission will launch a secure European online platform on disinformation to support the network of fact-checkers and relevant academic researchers.

The platform should offer cross-border data collection and analysis tools, as well as access to EU-wide data. This will enable the network members to act as trusted flaggers. It will also facilitate deeper understanding of online disinformation and formulation of evidence-based strategies for further limiting its spread.

Who will be part of the independent network of fact-checkers?

The network will gather fact-checkers operating on the basis of high standards, such as the [International Fact-Checking Network Code of Principles](#). These principles foresee commitment to non-partisanship and fairness, transparency of sources and of funding, transparency of methodology, and open and honest corrections. The Commission will not interfere with the activity of the network but only provide operational support.

Does the Communication suggest new ways of supporting quality journalism?

Quality news media – including public media – and journalism play an important role in providing citizens with high quality and diverse information. By ensuring a pluralistic and diverse media environment, they can uncover, counterbalance, and dilute disinformation.

As part of the ongoing Commission support for the provision of information on EU affairs from a pan-European point of view, a new call will be launched in 2018 for the production and dissemination of quality news content on EU affairs through data-driven news media.

The Commission will support initiatives promoting media freedom and pluralism, quality news media and journalism. Journalists must have the right digital skills to be able to use data and social media analytics, with a view to enhancing fact-finding and verification.

EU Member States are encouraged to consider horizontal aid schemes to address market failures hampering the sustainability of quality journalism, as well as support measures for specific activities, such as training for journalists, service and product innovation.

Does the Commission foresee any action to support the use of new technologies to address the issue?

The Communication recognises the key role of emerging technologies which are changing the way information is produced and disseminated, and have the potential to play a central role in tackling disinformation over the longer term. For instance:

- Artificial intelligence, subject to appropriate human oversight, will be crucial for verifying, identifying and tagging disinformation;
- Technologies for media to enable customisable and interactive online experiences can help citizens discover content and identify disinformation;
- Innovative technologies, such as blockchain, can help preserve the integrity of content, validate the reliability of information and/or its sources, enable transparency and traceability, and promote trust in news displayed on the Internet. This could be combined with the use of trustworthy electronic identification, authentication and verified pseudonyms;
- Cognitive algorithms that handle contextually-relevant information, including the accuracy and the quality of data sources, will improve the relevance and reliability of search results.

The Commission will make full use of the Horizon 2020 Work Programme to support research activities on tools and technologies such as artificial intelligence and blockchain that can contribute to a better online space, increasing cybersecurity and trust in online services.

To address the issue of fake accounts, the Commission will explore the feasibility of setting up voluntary systems to allow greater accountability based on electronic identification and authentication scheme. Together with others actions aimed at improving traceability online (improving the functioning, availability and accuracy of information on IP and domain names in the WHOIS system and promoting the uptake of the IPv6 protocol), this would also contribute to limiting cyberattacks.

What will the Commission do to improve the media literacy of online users?

The Commission will organise a European Week of Media Literacy to strengthen cross-border cooperation among relevant organisations, highlight the importance of teaching digital and media literacy skills and ensure that interactions with media and on social networks are positive and enriching

Critical thinking, analysing media items, and interpreting messages lead to more knowledgeable citizens and empower the next generation, leading to new forms of self-expression and communication, and richer participation in society.

The Commission will continue to support initiatives such as the [Digital Opportunity traineeship](#), which aim to strengthen digital skills and awareness of European citizens – in particular, the younger generation – and promoting common values and inclusion.

The Commission also encourages Member States to mobilise resources and include in their educational policies digital citizenship, media literacy, the development of critical-thinking skills for the online environment, and awareness-raising activities on disinformation and online amplification techniques.

Furthermore, the Commission will encourage fact-checkers and civil society organisations to provide educational material to schools and educators and include targeted initiatives on disinformation online in the #SaferInternet4EU Campaign.

Would the measures that the Commission is proposing prevent illicit data mining as seen in the recent Cambridge Analytica files?

The Communication does not directly address the problem of third party access to users' data. However, the action proposed by the Communication complements the [General Data Protection Regulation](#) (GDPR), which will apply across the EU as from 25 May 2018, and which will strengthen protection of the personal data of users of online platforms.

The media literacy actions foreseen in the Communication should increase awareness among users about the functioning of the algorithms and advertising models on social media.

The Code of Practice committing online platforms and the advertising industry should also ensure transparency about sponsored content, in particular political and issue-based advertising that could influence public opinion. This should be complemented by repositories where comprehensive information about sponsored content is provided, such as the actual sponsor identity, amounts spent and targeting criteria used. Similar mechanisms should be put in place so that users understand why they have been targeted by a given advertisement.

Empowering users is also an objective of the [new ePrivacy rules](#) that the Commission proposed in 2017. The aim is that all people and businesses in the EU enjoy the same level of protection of their electronic communications. In addition, the rules would enhance transparency regarding privacy settings and provide effective control of users' device information.

What will the Commission do to tackle the problem of online disinformation in view of the European elections in 2019?

During election campaigns the phenomenon of fake news and online disinformation is particularly visible. It can impact voters' choices which means we need to be particularly vigilant.

With a view to the 2019 European Parliament elections, the Commission has encouraged the competent national authorities to identify best practices for the identification, mitigation and management of risks to the electoral process from cyberattacks and disinformation ([Commission Recommendation of 14.2.2018 on enhancing the European nature and efficient conduct of the 2019 elections to the European Parliament](#)).

In the Cooperation Group established under the Directive on the security of Network and Information Systems (NIS Directive), Member States have started to map existing European initiatives on cybersecurity of network and information systems used for electoral processes, with the aim of developing voluntary guidance.

The Commission will provide all the necessary support, together with the European Union Agency for Network and Information Security, to the work that the NIS Cooperation Group is carrying out on the cybersecurity of elections. By the end of 2018, the Group should deliver practical recommendations and measures that can be implemented by Member States to secure their election life-cycle.

The Commission will also organise a high-level conference with Member States on cyber-enabled threats to elections in late 2018, through its Task Force on the Security Union.

How does the Communication match the work of the East StratComm Task Force?

The two initiatives are independent but complementary as they will both address disinformation campaigns within and outside the EU.

The [EEAS East StratCom Task Force](#) was set up by the High Representative/Vice-President Federica **Mogherini** in 2015 on [the mandate of the European Council](#) *“to challenge Russia’s ongoing disinformation campaigns”*. The Task Force is communicating the EU’s policies towards its eastern neighbourhood; strengthening the overall media environment in the eastern neighbourhood, including support for media freedom and strengthening independent media; and improving the EU’s capacity to forecast, address and raise awareness of pro-Kremlin disinformation activities. In the area of disinformation, the Task Force reports on and analyses disinformation trends, explains and rebuts disinformation narratives, and raises awareness of disinformation.

In cooperation with the European Union External Action (EEAS), the Commission will strengthen its strategic communication capability by first reinforcing the coordination of its communication activities aiming at tackling disinformation.

The Commission and EEAS will explore further options to develop strategic communications responses and other mechanisms, together with Member States, to build resilience as well as counter systematic disinformation campaigns and hybrid interference by foreign governments towards citizens and other entities in the EU.

The Commission, in cooperation with the EEAS, will report in June on the progress made so far in hybrid threats, including cybersecurity, strategic communication and counter intelligence areas. What are the next steps?

- The Commission will shortly convene a multi-stakeholder forum to provide a framework for efficient cooperation among relevant stakeholders, including online platforms, the advertising industry and major advertisers, media and civil society representatives, and to secure a

commitment to coordinate and scale up efforts to tackle disinformation. The forum's first output should be an EU-wide Code of Practice on Disinformation to be published by July 2018, with a view to having a measurable impact by October 2018.

- In parallel, the Commission will support the creation of an independent European network of fact-checkers before the summer to establish common working methods, exchange best practices, achieve the broadest possible coverage across the EU, and participate in joint fact-checking and related activities.
- The Commission will also launch a secure European online platform on disinformation in September to support the network of fact-checkers and relevant academic researchers. Access to data will be privacy-compliant.
- In parallel, the Commission will launch as soon as possible a study to examine the applicability of EU rules and possible gaps in relation to the identification of online sponsored content.
- By December 2018, the Commission will report on the progress made. The report will also examine the need for further action to ensure the continuous monitoring and evaluation of the outlined actions.

For More Information

[Press release: Tackling online disinformation: Commission proposes an EU-wide Code of Practice](#)

[Factsheet: Tackling the spread of disinformation online](#)