Online disinformation poses a substantial threat to democracies. Disinformation erodes trust in institutions and in media and harms democracies by hampering the ability of citizens to take informed decisions. It impairs freedom of expression, and in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic, disinformation also threatens to have a direct impact on citizens' health.

Disinformation is 'verifiably false or misleading information created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and that may cause public harm' as defined by the Communication on Tackling Online Disinformation.

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A growing threat

According to the last Eurobarometers:

- 71% of Europeans encounter fake news online several times a month;
- 30% come across news or information they believe misrepresents reality every day or almost every day;
- 63% of younger Europeans come across fake news more than once a week.

A European action plan on disinformation

2018 action plan on disinformation has set the framework of the European Union’s actions against disinformation by:

- improving detection and analysis capabilities;
- raising awareness and strengthening societal resilience;
- increasing coordinated responses;
- mobilising online platforms and the advertising sector

The Code of Practice on Disinformation

The Code of Practice on disinformation is the first worldwide self-regulatory initiative on disinformation subscribed by major social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, TikTok), tech companies (Google, Microsoft and Mozilla), advertising industry associations and advertisers.

The Code aims to reduce the spread of disinformation by:

1. improving transparency of how advertising is used, to demonetise disinformation spreaders;
2. enhancing the transparency of political and issue-based advertising;
3. limiting and fighting bots and other manipulative techniques used to artificially spread disinformation;
4. empowering consumers by improving access to diverse and trustworthy content;
5. facilitating fact-checking and research activities to understand the reach and amplitude of the disinformation phenomenon.

The Code has proven to be a very valuable instrument and provided a framework for a structured dialogue between relevant stakeholders to ensure greater transparency and accountability of platforms’ policies on disinformation. At the same time, it needs strengthening in several areas to improve its efficiency in limiting the spread of disinformation.

The COVID-19 Disinformation Monitoring Programme

The COVID-19 disinformation monitoring and reporting programme set out in the Joint Communication “Tackling COVID-19 disinformation - Getting the facts right” is a transparency measure to ensure accountability towards the public of the efforts made by the Code’s signatories to limit online disinformation related to COVID-19.

The monitoring programme achieved, for example:

- better visibility of COVID-19 information from authoritative sources (e.g. the WHO and national health organisations);
new tools and services for users to easily access and recognise reliable information on COVID-19 (e.g. information panels, search prompts, specific labels, dedicated pop-ups, etc.);
- robust actions taken to limit the flow of advertising to third-party webpages spreading COVID-19 disinformation;
- actions taken against content containing false or misleading information related to COVID-19 in violation of the platforms terms of service (e.g. by demoting or removing content liable to cause physical harm or impair public health policies).

**Strengthening the Code of Practice on Disinformation**

The European Democracy Action Plan set out how to step up the fight against disinformation. Building on the assessment of the first year of the Code, and the experiences of the 2019 European Elections and the COVID-19 Disinformation Monitoring programme, the Commission published guidance to strengthen the Code of Practice on Disinformation in May 2021. The current and prospective signatories are now expected to deliver the strengthened Code of Practice by the end of March 2022.

The strengthened Code of Practice should for example aim to:

- support adequate visibility of reliable information of public interest;
- reduce the monetisation of disinformation (flow of advertising revenues to purveyors of disinformation);
- limit the artificial amplification of disinformation campaigns;
- step up fact-checking and strengthen the cooperation between signatories, fact checkers and researchers;
- ensure effective data disclosure for research on disinformation;
- put in place a robust monitoring mechanism to ensure transparency and public scrutiny of the effectiveness of the signatories’ actions.

The Commission is also working to update its digital rulebook with the proposed Digital Services Act (DSA). The DSA will also establish a co-regulatory backstop for measures, which would be included in the revised and strengthened Code of Practice on disinformation.

**A long-term strategy: Strengthening societal resilience**

The work of fact-checkers and researchers contributes significantly in countering the spread of online disinformation. The Commission is supporting the creation of a strong multidisciplinary community of independent European fact-checkers and academic researchers.

**The European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO)**

The European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) serves as a hub for fact-checkers, academics and other partners to collaborate, actively link with media organisations and media literacy experts, and provide support to policy makers. A €2.5 million central IT infrastructure equipped with state-of-the-art fact-checking technology and research tools will coordinate fact-checking and research activities, create a repository of media literacy material, and provide trainings.

Additional funding of €9 million will establish EDMO’s national hubs, which will carry out coordinated fact-checking, research and media literacy actions to limit the impact of disinformation at national and EU level.
Media literacy initiatives

Media literacy skills are key to ensure people’s resilience to disinformation. The European Commission provides support through:

- actions supporting media pluralism, quality journalism and media literacy.
- the Media Literacy for All programme, which funds various projects so media literacy practitioners can develop innovative strategies to raise awareness on disinformation and to promote a responsible use of social media. Ongoing projects include:
  - SMaRT-EU: provides tools, suggestions and resources to train young and old
  - Influencers Trust Label: develops a transparency and trust label
  - FREEYOU: a fact checking programme for the youth
- the European Media Literacy Week promotes media literacy initiatives and projects across the EU to underline the societal importance of media literacy.

Related topics

Media Disinformation

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