HIGH LEVEL POLICY DIALOGUE

Online disinformation ahead of the European Parliament elections: towards societal resilience

11 February 2019

Venue: Teatro, Badia Fiesolana, European University Institute (EUI)

Conveners:

Madeleine de Cock Buning | Part-Time Professor at the School of Transnational Governance, EUI, President, Board of Commissioners Dutch Media Authority, former Chair, European Commission High-Level Expert Group on fake news and disinformation and former Chair, of the European Regulators Group for Audio Visual Media Services (ERGA).

Miguel Poiares Maduro | Director, of the School of Transnational Governance, EUI, former Minister Deputy to the Prime Minister and Minister for Regional Development in Portugal and former Advocate General at the European Court of Justice.

Few would disagree that *fake news*, the most visible part of the war of disinformation, represents a real and present threat for our societies. The debate on disinformation encompasses a spectrum of information types. From low-risk forms of click-bait to intentional attempts to corrode trust in our democracies, the latter sometimes by means of techniques that are extremely sophisticated and based on well-orchestrated plans by foreign states and local groups. Information warfare requires capabilities that are both adequate and proportionate.

Luckily the evidence we have so far, from research carried out by the Oxford Reuters group,[1] is that the direct impact of disinformation on political decision making is not alarming with its effects largely limited to groups of "believers" seeking to reinforce their own opinions and prejudices. One needs to also take into account that accusations of fake news are frequently hurled indiscriminately and have themselves become a tool of delegitimisation, as different sides attempt to impose their own narrative. And, paradoxically, the more fake news is discussed, the greater societal problem it is felt to be. This undermines trust in all media and instils the idea that it is impossible to know what is true and what is not.

It is this distrust that is especially detrimental to the fundamental role of media as a pillar in our democratic societies. Distrust muzzles media in their role as watchdog thereby severely challenging their ability to provide effective checks and balances. The societal distrust is furthered by so-called "deep fakes", a development made possible by artificial intelligence whereby audio-visual content is manipulated in such a way as to make it impossible to recognise true from false.

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[1] hiips://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/measuring-reach-fake-news-and-online-disinformation-europe

These challenges need to be taken on board and addressed ahead of the upcoming European Parliament elections. If we believe that an informed citizen underpins democracy, then these issues require action. But what action exactly?

In December 2018, the European Commission and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy presented the 'Action Plan against Disinformation' setting out measures to tackle disinformation in Europe and beyond. In January 2019 the European Commission published the first reports submitted by signatories of the Code of Practice against disinformation of October 2018. While the Commission welcomes the progress made, it also calls on signatories to intensify their efforts in the run up to the 2019 EU elections.

Globally we witness increasing calls for certain sources and websites to be blacklisted, blocked or demoted in searches. Social Media Platforms are not only pressured to filter disinformation but also to make available the private data of those who have allegedly published fake news or defamatory statements in judicial proceedings taking place in distant jurisdictions where they have no effective way to defend themselves.

Entrusting private entities and public institutions with the decision as to what is true or false while playing the role of censors entails serious risks for fundamental rights, with the serious risk of throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

At the core of democracy there lies a paradox. It both depends on and is itself a search for truth that can only be attained by the contrasting and discussion of different viewpoints. Consequently, this High-Level Policy Dialogue on Disinformation ahead of the European Parliament elections will take off from a fundamental rights perspective and will focus on the strengthening of societal resilience by tools and methods like fact-checking, media- and information literacy, media pluralism and the contribution of academic institutes as independent agents well positioned to foster balanced multi-dimensional approaches.[2]

This event is organised in collaboration with the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF) at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, EUI

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[2] The *Report of the High Level Expert Group to the EU Commission on Fake News and online disinformation* and the Commission Communication on *Tackling online disinformation: a European approach*, make clear that platforms have a responsibility to take all possible relevant and effective measures. This HLPD will not focus on those measures but rather on societal resilience.

■ PROGRAMME

10 February 2019

19.30	Group Dinner	**B-Roof, Grand Hotel Baglioni** *(Piazza dell'Unità Italiana, 6, 50123 Firenze, Italia, Tel. +39 055 23580)*

11 February 2019

09.00 – 09.15   Welcome and Introduction

09.15 – 09.30   Tour de table

09.30 – 10.45   **Session I: The need for states to address potentially detrimental forms of disinformation that are sometimes state-driven and attempt to corrode trust in democracies requires attention. What responses will avoid the risks posed by private and public censorship while being simultaneously effective?**

Introduction: **Madeleine de Cock Buning** | School of Transnational Governance, EUI, Board of Commissioners Dutch Media Authority

Given the global increase in calls for certain sources or websites to be blacklisted, blocked or demoted, various forms of private and public censorship are increasingly likely to occur. How can censorship of legitimate speech be avoided in line with international human rights standards? Fact-checking has an important role to play, provided it is independent and free from any political influence. How and by whom should fact-checking be organised and carried out?

10.45 – 11.15   Coffee Break | *Teatro*

11.15 – 12.30   **Session II: Media and information literacy**

Introduction: **Sonia Livingstone** | Department of Media and Communications, LSE

Given today's information overload, media and information literacy (MIL) is a crucial component of critical thinking as it can enable reasoned participation in the on-line public sphere. MIL can also help to contribute to a more trustworthy digital information ecosystem: a critical readership will provide an incentive to media companies to continuously improve their products and services. From a European perspective, education is considered an area of "supporting competence" for which the EU can support, coordinate and supplement Member State action. At the same time, the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive introduces new media literacy obligations for Member States and video-sharing platforms. What actions are currently being applied and can be taken in this field? What overarching solutions should be put in place and how?

12.30 – 13.30   Lunch | *Sala Giuseppe Buonsanti*

13.30 – 14.45	**Session III: Challenges for Media Pluralism**

Introduction: **Pier Luigi Parcu** | Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, EUI

Independent and pluralistic media are crucial components of a democratic society. Diluting disinformation through enhanced visibility of a wide variety of trusted news can therefore only achieve its goals if combined with actions designed to preserve diversity and the long-term economic sustainability of the news media eco system. How can sustainability be ensured given that news media is currently undergoing a transformation from the traditional off-line environment to the online distribution model? How does one define quality journalism? What measures are needed to ensure that certain forms of journalism remain financially viable? Should states and public bodies play a key role in this dynamic?

14.45 – 15.15	Coffee Break	*Teatro*

15.15 – 16.30	**Session IV: The role of academia**

Introduction: **Miguel Poiares Maduro** | School of Transnational Governance, EUI

The evolving nature of disinformation requires a substantial strengthening of detection and analytical capabilities. While independent fact-checking is important to identify individual cases of disinformation, continuous, multi-disciplinary research is necessary to foster a better understanding of the actors, the reasons behind, the techniques and methods used to maximise the impact of increasingly sophisticated disinformation strategies. An in-depth knowledge of local information environments is important to prioritise research effors around topics with high impact on national audiences. At the same time, effective coordination among researchers in different Member States may be essential in view of the transnational nature of the phenomenon.

Against this backdrop, what type of independent research should be promoted in order to ensure robust and evidence-based policy responses? What should be the role of public authorities in supporting such endeavours? How could national research teams best coordinate their efforts at EU level ?

16.30 – 17.15	Wrap-up and Conclusions

17.30 – 18.30	**Press and outreach event - Online disinformation ahead of the European Parliament elections: towards societal resilience**

Presentation of outcomes to press and public - What actions are and should be taken ahead of the upcoming European Parliament elections and all the national elections to follow? What lessons can the EU learn from the US experience? The event will present future proof responses to disinformation emerging from the High Level Policy Dialogue, including strengthening societal resilience by tools and methods like fact-checking, media- and information literacy, media pluralism and the contribution of well coordinated academic institutes as independent

agents well positioned to provide sound evidence and bridge balanced multi-dimensional approaches towards private and public policy makers.

Miguel Poiares Maduro | School of Transnational Governance, EUI
Paolo Cesarini| EC DG Connect
Robert Post | Yale Law School
Madeleine de Cock Buning | School of Transnational Governance, EUI, Chair EU High Level Group on fake news and disinformation

18.30 – 19.30   Farewell Cocktail | *Teatro*

■ PARTICIPANTS

Elda Brogi	Scientific Coordinator, Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, European University Institute
Guido Caldarelli	Professor, IMT School
Paolo Cesarini	Head of Unit, Media Convergence and Social Media, DG Connect, European Commission
Meg Chang	Public Policy Manager, Elections, Facebook
Martina Chapman	Director, Mercury Insights
Rocco De Nicola	Professor of Computer Science, IMT Lucca
Simona De Rosa	European Observatory on Disinformation
Madeleine de Cock Buning	Part-time Professor, School of Transnational Governance, European University Institute, Former Chair, European Commission High-Level Expert Group on fake news and disinformation, President, Board of Commissioners Dutch Media Authority
Pablo Fernandez	Director of Innovation at Chequeado, Argentina
Divina Frau-Meigs	Professor, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, France
Lisa Ginsborg	School of Transnational Governance, European University Institute
Renee Hobbs	Professor of Communication Studies at the Harrington School of Communication and Media, University of Rhode Island
Gabriela Jacomella	Former Policy Leaders Fellow, School of Transnational Governance, European University Institute
Igor Kanižaj	Professor, Department of Journalism and Media Production, University of Zagreb
Lubos Kuklis	Chair, European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services
Sonia Livingstone	Professor of Social Psychology, Department of Media and Communications, LSE
Miguel Poiares Maduro	Director, School of Transnational Governance, European University Institute
Alexios Mantzarlis	Director, International Fact-Checking Network, Poynter Institute
Craig Matasick	Policy Analyst, OECD
Iva Nenadic	Research Associate, Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, European University Institute
Andrea Nicolai	European Observatory on Disinformation
Pier Luigi Parcu	Director, Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, European University Institute
Oreste Pollicino	Professor, Bocconi University, Italy
Robert Post	Sterling Professor of Law, Yale Law School

Gianni Riotta	Professor, Princeton University; Director, LUISS Data Lab
Tobias Schmid	Vice Chair, European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services
Renate Schroeder	Director, European Federation of Journalists
Andrea Simoncini	Professor, University of Florence
Marc Sundermann	Head of the Brussels Liaison Office, SVP Government Relations, Bertelsmann SE & Co. KGaA
Urska Umek	Head of Media Unit, Information Society Department, Council of Europe

■ LOCATION

Teatro, Badia Fiesolana: Via dei Roccettini 9, 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole, Florence

■ CONTACTS

Lisa Ginsborg | School of Transnational Governance, EUI | Lisa.Ginsborg@EUI.eu
Fiona Wong | School of Transnational Governance, EUI | Fiona.Wong@EUI.eu