



EU DisinfoLab's position on the Joint Communication on "Tackling COVID-19 Disinformation: Getting the facts right"

10 June 2020

As widely known, the COVID-19 pandemic has birthed what is now commonly referred to as the "infodemic".¹ The risks disinformation poses to our societies have been heightened in this context, as false information can really be a matter of life and death. This has amplified the necessity for immediate and meaningful action; therefore, we welcome this dedicated Joint Communication² on the infodemic.

However, at the time of a pandemic, it is essential to prioritise factual and not political communication. **Strategic communications are – in essence – political communication.** In view of this, **a central mistake with the Joint Communication is the conflation of political communication with the fight against disinformation.** In a conflictual environment, **one's strategic communications will always be qualified by others as its propaganda.**

It is not up to public authorities to fight disinformation by deciding what counts as valid information, nor is it appropriate to showcase your own achievements in crisis management while communicating on COVID-19 disinformation. The European Commission's webpage on fighting COVID-19 disinformation³ wrongfully mixes factual information such as "we are all at risk of being infected by the coronavirus" with assertions such as "the EU has always supported Member States' investments in public health". This is a political statement that could be challenged in many ways. **Public authorities must retain a neutral position in the communication of authoritative information, which is in conflict with strategic communications, since the latter are designed to channel political messages.** Hence, mixing the two clearly sets a dangerous precedent in Europe for others to follow. **Has the Commission considered that some EU Member States may be inspired to set up a similar webpage to communicate their own political messages?**

That is why the task of fact-checking and countering mis—and disinformation should rather be left to independent media, researchers, and civil society. **But, sadly, this Joint Communication fails to properly address the support needed for independent media, researchers, and civil society in Europe.**

The paternalistic tone of the communication conveyed via statements such as "the Commission will consider open-sourcing some of the tools it has developed to detect misleading narratives and unreliable online sources to make them available to the fact-checking community" reveals **a deep**

1 https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200415-sitrep-86-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=c615ea20_6

2 https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication-tackling-covid-19-disinformation-getting-facts-right_en.pdf

3 https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation_en

misunderstanding and lack of appreciation of what the community is doing to tackle dis/misinformation.

Faced with funding cuts and multiple threats, **the media, research and civil society ecosystem centred around tackling disinformation is at risk**. This work is human intensive:⁴ producing disinformation is cheap but tackling it is expensive (resources but also security, both physical and online).⁵ Due to a systemic lack of funding in Europe, key civil society actors are currently funded primarily by US and UK public and private entities. **The Commission should therefore rather reflect on how it can support independent actors to become more robust and resilient.**

The measures proposed are very centralised, with a focus on institutional communication and a few European funded projects. However, disinformation grows rapidly through decentralised networks, and so far, the best response to tackling disinformation has been offered by decentralised actors such as Bellingcat, Graphika, and DFRLab.

Therefore, **it's essential that the EU sets up an ambitious, decentralised framework to fund civil society, journalists and researchers across the EU. This would ensure the healthy participation and empowerment of independent organisations to both counter disinformation and hold platforms accountable for upholding democratic principles.** This framework should include smaller and more flexible funding in order to support organisational resilience and avoid the necessity for organisations to promise specific outcomes. In response to recurrent threats and abuse, we would urge that this EU framework additionally provides funding for both the physical and online security of civil society organisations.

While **some progress has been made, such as the engagement with the Domain Name System industry, closer cooperation between consumer authorities and platforms, and the follow-the-money mindset regarding advertising revenue,** asking the online platforms for "monthly reports" on how they are reaching unverifiable KPIs is also far from being enough. Surely the Code of Practice on Disinformation and its resulting assessments have taught us that.

Overall, this Joint Communication demonstrates that **there is still much work to do to put together a meaningful response to disinformation – one that encompasses all stakeholders and one that does not mix tackling disinformation with political communication.** It also remains to be seen how the lessons learned from the Code of Practice on Disinformation will factor into the prospective Digital Services Act and European Democracy Action Plan.

4 <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-fake-news-fact-checkers-google-facebook-germany-spain-bosnia-brazil-united-states/>

5 <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/social-media/these-disinformation-researchers-saw-coronavirus-infodemic-coming-n1206911>