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Policy Brief

False information about coronavirus and beyond: Lessons for the EU?

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The spread of the global coronavirus pandemic has infected the world with a substantial surge of false information. When there is already a significant amount of confusion, mis- and disinformation can amplify feelings of fear and enhance risks. Joint action is crucial to tackle this unprecedented amount of false information and the EU is well-placed to lead a coordinated response. While important steps have already been taken, more decisive action is necessary. This Policy Brief provides an overview of significant examples of mis- and disinformation in the context of the pandemic and identifies key lessons for the EU's broader fight against false information.

#Corona
#Misinformation
#Disinformation

The current circumstances provide a perfect breeding ground for false information: the spread of a disease creates a lot of anxiety and the uncertainty surrounding it exacerbates these fears. Given this uncomfortable feeling of uncertainty, people try to get as much information as possible while having less regard for the quality or source of the information. When it comes to the coronavirus, both mis- and disinformation have been spreading online. Misinformation refers to false information that is spread accidentally by actors unaware of the falsity of the claim, while disinformation is false or misleading information that is spread intentionally, for example for political or financial reasons.

Both mis- and disinformation can be difficult to refute, especially if their originators claim the information comes from a "secret" but trusted source or a non-public meeting. At the same time, people want to protect their friends and families and tend to share any kind of information, often justifying it on a "just in case" basis. The combination of these factors, enhanced by the multiplier effects of social media and messaging services, leaves ample room for the surge and spread of mis- and disinformation. What kind of false information is out there and what can Europe do about it?

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Misinformation

A significant amount of misinformation concerning the SARS-CoV-2 is related to the medical aspects of the virus. Its novelty and the scarcity of reliable scientific information about it contribute to the spread of false information. There are many stories involving possible cures and vaccines for the virus, as well as claims misrepresenting the number of infections and deaths caused by it.

These claims are dangerous, as people pin their hopes on false remedies, disregarding the advice given by the World Health Organisation and possibly spreading the virus further. For example, some claim that a vaccine for the virus is already available, while false statements made about cures involve herbal remedies, and other "natural cures". Some state that it is possible to kill the virus with UV light, chlorine and high temperatures, while others claim that one can test for the virus by holding one's breath. The Estonian minister of the interior Mart Helme suggested the virus is just like the common cold and can be treated with mustard patches and goose fat. Yet others tie the outbreak of the virus to the rollout of the 5G network, stating that the virus is a coverup for illnesses really caused by 5G. Some even go so far as to claim that the virus does not exist at all or that its threat is grossly exaggerated.

Another prominent category of false information concerns measures to limit the spread of the virus. This category expanded due to the rapidly evolving and often uncoordinated response to the crisis among and within countries. One of the biggest pieces of false information that spread in many countries was that of an imminent lockdown or other similar measures with strict restrictions on movement within the country or a city, at a time when they were not (yet) in place. We have seen this in Germany, France, the US, Ireland and elsewhere. In Estonia, in less than 24 hours, a simple text message to the Defence League (a voluntary national defence organisation) about a possible need for reinforced border controls morphed, over the course of several days, into an alleged lockdown of the capital.

While lockdowns are a reality in some countries, spreading misinformation about them when there is none in place can be highly dangerous. In Germany, false information concerning the closure of supermarkets and food stores reached far and wide, inciting panic and hoarding of food and other everyday items. In both Germany and Estonia, the respective governments had to intervene and refute the claims to stabilize the situation. These examples illustrate the speed and volatility with which messages are being spread in times like these.

Disinformation

The precise source of a single piece of information can be extremely difficult to determine. This means that it is often impossible to determine whether the piece of false information was spread accidentally or intentionally. There are, however, instances of messages about the coronavirus delivered with a clear intent to spread disinformation and sow further confusion and discord – a similar tactic to that seen during the 2016 US presidential election. This kind of messaging results in what has been coined 'the global battle of narratives'.

According to the European External Action Service's (EEAS) East StratCom Task Force, the Kremlin has been very active in disseminating false information. Some disinformation

efforts have claimed that the coronavirus was created and released on purpose as a biological weapon, attributing it to China, the US or Russia. Various claims have talked about the virus being used as a tool for population control. Some hint at the virus being created to decrease the number of older people that ‚rely on the state' and/or ‚drain the social welfare or healthcare systems'.

Misleading claims surrounding actions allegedly taken by the EU in order to control the population have also been made. While some asserted the Schengen area no longer exists, others stated that the EU would impose mass vaccination. At the other end of the spectrum are assertions of the EU's inability to control the situation or its reliance on external support from countries like Russia and China. This kind of narrative benefits both Russia and China, as it portrays them in a positive light, while stating that the EU lacks solidarity. One can debate whether the measures taken by the EU are adequate but claims that there is no solidarity between the member states are clearly false. All these accusations spread quickly on social media and sometimes get taken up by prominent figures, giving them further weight. For example, Tom Cotton, a US Senator, claimed that the virus originated from a Chinese research lab for infectious diseases.

It is clear that this is a good moment to seize on the uncertainty to push one's political agenda. Important global actors like the EU, the US, Russia and China all take part in the global battle of narratives, but they resort to different measures when it comes to managing the messaging, with Russia and China engaging in information manipulation. Besides global actors, however, right-wing populists within Europe have joined in, blaming refugees for the outbreak. All in all, disinformation concerning the novel virus is abundant and needs to be tackled decisively.

Key takeaways for the European Union

The current crisis is a strong learning opportunity for the European institutions. Why the European institutions? Because the spread of mis- and disinformation is a cross-border issue. Social media have no borders and false information, especially in English, can spread far and wide. While companies and member states need to play their part, a coordinated European response will be most effective in tackling the problem.

• **Social media companies can and should do more**

Facebook's, Google's and Amazon's crackdowns on false information regarding the coronavirus show that it is not about technical issues, but a matter of will. When the 2016 US election and the Brexit referendum were affected by dis- and misinformation, these companies tended to claim that they did not have the technical means to take it down. They argued that they could not cope with the magnitude of info or that the machine learning programmes were not effective enough in identifying false news.

During the current crisis, these same companies have taken strong and unprecedented action against false information concerning the virus. For example, Amazon has been removing products falsely claiming to protect against or cure the coronavirus, while Facebook and YouTube (the latter a subsidiary of Google LLC) have been deleting content about false remedies, whose makers are seeking profit from the situation. Certainly, there have been technological advances since 2016 and it might be easier to identify misinformation on public health than in a broader political and electoral context. One is nonetheless left to speculate whether these companies are more diligent now because of the huge economic losses associated with a further exacerbation of the crisis. Either way,

the current situation represents an important learning opportunity for the companies themselves.

In September 2018, the European Commission and many large social media and technology companies agreed on a Code of Practice on Disinformation. Yet, this has so far proved ineffective in tackling disinformation. During the European elections in May 2019, large disinformation campaigns were conducted on social media sites, despite the measures the companies had agreed to undertake under the Code of Practice. Even if one can argue about the capability of publicly traded monopolies for self-regulation, it is clear that the Code of Practice is insufficient for fighting disinformation. The Commission should thus introduce regulation that legally binds these companies to maintain a tight grip on false information in electoral contexts.

- **The EU should bolster its action to counter false information**

To avoid the panic that false information causes, it must be countered rapidly and decisively with brief and accurate information. The correct information must then be widely disseminated via social media and through reliable news organisations in order for it to occupy the space held by false information. It is also important to build trust in these sources by proving their credibility in different ways, such as relying on scientists and fact-checking sites. More broadly, conspiracies about the media being controlled by the political elite must be countered.

The EU should take an active role in organising and supporting these actions. It should increase its financial support for approved fact-checking sites in the member states. In addition, EU Institutions should rethink their own activities. A fact-checking site operated by the EEAS, EUvsDisinfo, which focuses on pro-Kremlin disinformation, has been effective during the corona crisis. However, while a lot of disinformation campaigns are indeed pro-Kremlin, there are also plenty of other sources of false information. The territorial focus of the East StratCom Task Force should thus be expanded. A more general fact-checking site targeting all false information concerning the EU regardless of its origin could also be created. In addition, the Union should provide support to the member states in their actions tackling domestic disinformation campaigns.

The EU must also further develop its own Rapid Alert System on Disinformation. The system is a framework for Member States to coordinate responses to disinformation attacks and share data so as to create a common understanding and approach. Since its official start in March 2019, the system has not once been triggered. The coronavirus has generated copious amounts of mis- and disinformation, yet the Rapid Alert System was 'used' but not deployed to full capacity. In its Action Plan Against Disinformation, the Commission and the EEAS drew up a clear plan for the use of the Rapid Alert System. It is now time to put that plan to work.

- **Education and research must be at the top of the EU's digital agenda**

One of the most important aspects of countering false information is educating people and increasing their media literacy. The Union has the task of raising awareness and implementing programmes to coordinate educational actions taken by the member states. Commission President von der Leyen included "making Europe fit for the digital age" in her Political Guidelines, with a special section on digital skills. Yet, enactment of the Digital Education Action Plan has been glaring in its absence. Adopted in 2018, the plan is scheduled to receive an update this year. It is important that the updated

plan includes a clear way forward for implementing the actions presented in the plan as well as backing them with sufficient funding. However, as education remains within the competence of the member states, the EU also needs to push the latter into developing the educational skills necessary for Europe's digital future.

As well as developing digital skills, it is important to conduct research into mis- and disinformation, their reasons and the way they spread. With solid scientific information, combatting disinformation campaigns and teaching people media literacy skills will become more effective. Under the current framework programme Horizon 2020 within the EU budget, the Commission supported investments in new technologies for content verification. Its successor programme Horizon Europe is supposed to fund research fostering a better understanding of online disinformation and drawing up remedies. This funding priority should be maintained despite the controversial negotiations on the next multi-annual financial framework and the research results should be shared widely and put to effective use.

Conclusion

The "infodemic" brought about by the novel coronavirus creates continuous uncertainty. As false claims are refuted, new ones emerge. This situation can be exploited for political or financial gain. It enhances fear among and entails real risks for citizens. While the EU must take decisive action against the current infodemic, it must urgently draw valuable lessons for its future fight against mis- and disinformation. False information poses an existential threat to truth but also to the very fundaments of democracies, and the EU must collectively pull its weight or risk losing the battle for the prevalence of truth.