133rd plenary session, 6-7 February 2019

OPINION

Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- emphasises the fact that, in the near future, the vast majority of information will be disseminated through online channels and social media might be the main medium used to convey such information to people, particularly in western countries: it is already the case that more than half of all Europeans use social networks every day or two or three times a week;

- points out that the effectiveness of these disinformation campaigns is vastly increased through access to detailed personal information on social media users, obtained through or bought from social media, that can be used to personalise the disinformation shown, thus maximizing its effect;

- warns that social media's current operating mechanisms, more than those used by any other information channel, are conducive to the spreading of falsehoods: various academic studies have shown that false information appearing on Twitter, for example, is as much as 70% more likely to be shared by the user ("retweeted") than accurate information;

- points out that the risk of disinformation affects democratic societies and institutions at all levels; the targeted dissemination of online fake news can have just as damaging an effect on the local community (and political processes including European, national and local elections) as on countries as a whole; countering disinformation must therefore be a priority ahead of the European elections both for European institutions and social media networks to ensure free and fair elections;

- notes that the main players on the social media market – with the support of the European institutions – are currently focusing their efforts on combating disinformation by means of the "self-regulation" of social media platforms and their voluntary cooperation with external bodies (e.g. fact-checking organisations) and state institutions; social media platforms must invest greater efforts in countering fake news, including flagging, fact-checking, and actions to close fake accounts, dedicating sufficient resources to monitoring information flows in different languages in all EU Member States. In addition, social media platforms should promote the concept of "verifying" user accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or YouTube, so as to guarantee that they are trustworthy and ethical sources;

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Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach

I.   POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

Comments

1.   notes that recent years have seen major and rapid changes in the global media ecosystem. It is hard to overstate the impact of these changes on social and political life: over the course of a few years, the role of social media – platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube and Instagram – has expanded, becoming a priority channel for communication between people and transforming the way information and opinions are disseminated while traditional media has seen its influence and authority and creation of opinion making decreased;

2.   emphasises the fact that, in the near future, the vast majority of information will be disseminated through online channels and social media might be the main medium used to convey such information to people, particularly in western countries: it is already the case that more than half of all Europeans use social networks every day or two or three times a week;

3.   notes that the distinctive feature of social media is that they provide the opportunity for "many-to-many" communication unseen in the past and in other forms of media: any user of a given platform can – potentially, at least – get their message across to the millions of other users, without the intermediation of any moderators; this has both positive and negative consequences;

4.   points to another hallmark of social media: whereas with "traditional" media (the press, radio and television), a distinct group of creators (journalists, editors and administrators) determine what is published and can directly bear various types of responsibility for their decisions, in the case of social media this is often far more difficult, because for instance creators and distribution channels must first be identified. At the same time social media also allow information, including false information, to be disseminated rapidly to a large audience, or "go viral";

5.   emphasises the fact that this lack of accountability, characteristic of social media, is due to current legal provisions, as well as widespread anonymity, which all social platforms tolerate;

6.   notes with concern that the combination of massification, the lack of accountability, and anonymity on social media platforms has led to the practices, principles, legal safeguards and customs that have so far been meant to ensure the credibility of information, are being infringed;

7.   notes with particular concern that social media have become a way to spread disinformation and a tool for political, economic and social manipulation exploited by both domestic and external actors. It is difficult to quantify the manipulation currently taking place on social media: available research shows that, in 2018 alone, organised manipulation and disinformation

campaigns on social media took place in 48 countries, while various political groups (parties, governments, etc.) around the world have spent over half a billion dollars to carry out psychological operations or to manipulate public opinion on social media;

8.   also stresses that this disinformation is often used to disseminate views that are incompatible with the "indivisible, universal values of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity" enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and the European Convention on Human Rights;

9.   points out that the effectiveness of these disinformation campaigns is vastly increased through access to detailed personal information on social media users, obtained through or bought from social media, that can be used to personalise the disinformation shown, thus maximizing its effect;

10.   warns that social media's current operating mechanisms, more than those used by any other information channel, are conducive to the spreading of falsehoods: various academic studies have shown that false information appearing on Twitter, for example, is as much as 70% more likely to be shared by the user ("retweeted") than accurate information;

11.   also emphasises the fact that studies have identified other worrying phenomena: social media users have fundamental problems with distinguishing whether information disseminated by a given platform is well-founded and reliable;

12.   is concerned by the state of preparedness of the European Union and its member states to counter the new wave of disinformation that artificial intelligence could unleash; disinformation is already considered one of the most threatening instruments in future warfare;

13.   supports the European Parliament's messaging [1] regarding the importance for the EU and Member States cooperating with social media service providers to counter propaganda being spread through social media channels that could threaten social cohesion of our territories leading to the radicalisation of citizens, especially our youth;

14.   notes with satisfaction the progress of the debate on "fake news"/disinformation that is underway at European level. The European Commission communication on "Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach" is a key point of reference in the ongoing debate on how to halt online disinformation;

15.   underlines the fact that the European Commission's communication identifies four main elements in the strategy to counteract online disinformation:

    – increasing transparency (knowledge about the origin of the disinformation, to whom it is addressed and how, and who is paying for it to be produced and distributed);
    – promoting the diversity of information sources, especially those that encourage citizens to use their own critical judgement, thanks to the high quality guaranteed by good journalism;

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[1]   European Parliament 2016/2030 (INI)

- developing a system for assessing the reliability of information sources;
- implementing civic education programmes;

16. notes with interest the report produced by the Commission's High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, which should be considered as an essential complement to the Commission's communication. The expert group identified areas where previous efforts have failed, such as the opacity of the algorithms used by social platforms to rank and order how content is displayed to users;

17. highlights the useful work done by East StratCom, a specific unit within the European External Action Service that focuses on exposing Russian propaganda and disinformation;

18. also notes the discussion held in the European Parliament regarding online disinformation: although the Parliament did not reach a unified position on how to tackle disinformation (the political groups presented different positions), during the discussion particular emphasis was laid on the fact that the impact of Russian propaganda sources) on public opinion in EU countries should be a significant cause for concern;

Priorities

19. stresses that the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union guarantees all residents of the European Union the right to freedom of expression, which includes freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. The European institutions must aim to ensure that the right to be informed is effectively upheld;

20. points out that the risk of disinformation affects democratic societies and institutions at all levels; the targeted dissemination of online fake news can have just as damaging an effect on the local community (and political processes including European, national and local elections) as on countries as a whole; countering disinformation must therefore be a priority ahead of the European elections both for European institutions and social media networks to ensure free and fair elections;

21. also points out that disinformation is detrimental to communities in a variety of ways: it not only results in political decisions that are based on false assumptions, but can also incite hatred and aggression, expose citizens to (material) losses, and lead to threats to human life and health. In the long-run, disinformation is also going to undermine the trust of citizens in any source of information and in institutions, authorities and democracy;

22. stresses, meanwhile, that the fight against online disinformation must not come at the price of freedom of speech or the right to the protection of personal data, which must at all times remain the inalienable property of the individual user, who alone can authorise, cancel and audit access to all or part of data, and other fundamental values of the European community. Any form of censorship is unacceptable. The solutions adopted must be proportionate;

23. notes that the main players on the social media market – with the support of the European institutions – are currently focusing their efforts on combating disinformation by means of the "self-regulation" of social media platforms and their voluntary cooperation with external bodies (e.g. fact-checking organisations) and state institutions; social media platforms must invest greater efforts in countering fake news, including flagging, fact-checking, and actions to close fake accounts, dedicating sufficient resources to monitoring information flows in different languages in all EU Member States. In addition, social media platforms should promote the concept of "verifying" user accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or YouTube, so as to guarantee that they are trustworthy and ethical sources;

24. points out that if current efforts (e.g. the voluntary Code of Practice on Disinformation, voluntarily adopted in 2018 by Facebook, Twitter and other platforms) turn out to be insufficient and the problem of disinformation continues to grow, it may be necessary to resort to legal tools, requiring the bodies that control social media to take specific action;

Role of local and regional authorities in the fight against disinformation

25. points out that since one effect of disinformation is on local political and social processes, disinformation can also affect social conditions in local communities, and hence also citizens' quality of life;

26. underlines the fact that the Committee of the Regions, as the treaty-based representative of the European Union's local and regional authorities, is particularly well suited to take part in discussions on the threat of disinformation, and to initiate and coordinate measures to tackle this problem taken by local and regional authorities in Europe, in line with the widely accepted principle that the fight against disinformation must be rooted in cooperation among many different institutions;

27. identifies three main areas where the Committee of the Regions and local and regional authorities can show initiative and effectively support efforts to counteract current online disinformation: civic education, support for non-governmental organisations and civil society, and support for ethical local media;

Civic education

28. agrees with the conclusion of, for example, the report of the High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, that educating and teaching citizens about responsible and informed use of online media, particularly social media, is the best long-term way to combat disinformation;

29. notes with interest the European Commission's proposal for a new 2021-2027 "Digital Europe" programme, and encourages the European Parliament to propose that the European Social Fund for 2021-2027 include a priority on creating an informed society, resilient against propaganda and with the necessary competences to be able to verify information that is disseminated via the internet;

30. points out that local and regional authorities, as the level of governance closest to citizens – and often responsible for primary and secondary education – are best able to launch educational programmes that teach how to make responsible use of online information sources and how to distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources;

31. encourages local and regional authorities to take the appropriate steps to ensure that lessons on how to make proper use of online media will become part of school curricula, starting in primary school;

32. at the same time points out that the curricula brought in must be designed so that they can be easily modified and supplemented, given the ever changing nature of online media, and social media in particular;

33. also points out that teaching about how to make informed use of online media must take into account the fact that social media content often plays on emotions, which users sometimes perceive only subconsciously. Consequently, educators should be trained so they can provide users (participants in educational programmes) with age- and education-appropriate tools to avoid the trap of appeals to the emotions, as well as the trap of cognitive bias – considering only information and opinions that confirm one's own prior convictions to be correct;

34. notes that training and tools for educators should be a prerequisite because of the difficulty involved in teaching emotional intelligence and critical thinking. In general, educators have not received training in this area and are not necessarily aware of its importance or even of its existence. The difficulty of teaching such an important skill, when the teacher does not possess it, should be offset through tools and processes that are commensurate with the importance of these skills, not only with a view to tackling disinformation but to personal development as citizens and professional development;

35. points to the need to raise awareness among users that the essence of some social media and – to a certain extent – some traditional media can lead to the creation of "information bubbles" or echo-chambers where users only encounter views and information that they like, which may in some cases also include false information, the corrected version of which does not reach them. Moreover, the mechanisms of social media often seem to impede objective dialogue on different opinions and perspectives and agreement on compromises, which is the essence of democracy;

36. encourages local authorities and bodies responsible for education to constantly make consumers (especially younger ones) aware that it is in their best interests to guard against online disinformation. For disinformation is not restricted solely to politics and social issues: it very often occurs in a commercial context, in the area of financial services, online sales and health advice. Basing important decisions on disinformation may have tragic consequences;

37. declares its willingness to support local and regional authorities in this area, including by gathering experience from all EU Member States and by launching the development of codes of good practice;

Support for non-governmental organisations

38. encourages local authorities and communities to create a framework to support third sector organisations engaged in combating disinformation (e.g. by means of fact checking or civic education);

39. emphasises the fact that such support is necessary, since the cost of checking information is an order of magnitude greater than the cost of creating disinformation; independent fact-checking organisations, as well as those that aim to teach citizens how to recognise falsehoods, should be able to count on material assistance;

40. points out that it is precisely local and regional authorities that have the capacity to provide such support in various forms: competitions for grants, preferential lets of premises and other forms of aid;

41. draws attention to the potential of the Committee of the Regions to play a coordinating role, define best practices and facilitate the exchange of experiences;

Support for local media

42. draws attention to the fact that a very large proportion of the disinformation spread online is local in nature, and local and regional media can play an important role in correcting this disinformation, by following specific protocols and with adequate support. For these and other reasons the CoR notes the importance of quality local and regional media, comprising dynamic local and regional channels, among which public service bodies also play a role. This is especially important during the current transition which media consumption and production are undergoing;

43. points out, due to its diversity, the local media guarantees protection for the plurality of political views and information in any territory or region and that the protection of this plurality should be a priority objective. The local media are, currently, in a difficult situation in many EU Member States; the entry of social media into the market, together with their technical possibilities (ability to reach individuals and to precisely target content to specific people), has undercut the financial basis for local media's operations, i.e. classified advertisements, together, in some cases, by conscious attempts at the political level to weaken media pluralism. Materially weakened local media are, of course, less able to actively counteract lies that are circulated online;

44. calls, therefore, for a pan-European debate on ways to support the local media. The discussion should focus on two non-contradictory themes: support for the media to develop viable business models and the aid that local and regional authorities (local communities, as well as institutions at central or European level) can give to the local media, for instance through subsidies for certain media, so as to ensure a healthy mixture of opinions while at the same time continuing to comply with the principles of the EU single market, in particular the rules on State aid. Meanwhile, recommends that local and regional institutions put in place provisional measures to support the local press in order to ensure its survival.

Brussels, 6 February 2019

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions

Karl-Heinz Lambertz

The Secretary-General
of the European Committee of the Regions

Jiří Buriánek

II. PROCEDURE

Title	Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach
Reference(s)	COM(2018) 236 final
Legal basis	Article 307(1) TFEU
Procedural basis	Rule 41(b)(i)
Date of Council/EP referral/ Date of Commission letter	
Date of Bureau/President's decision	
Commission responsible	Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs (CIVEX)
Rapporteur	Olgierd Geblewicz (PL/EPP)
Analysis	20.08.2018
Discussed in commission	29.11.2011
Date adopted by commission	29.11.2011
Result of the vote in commission (majority, unanimity)	Majority
Date adopted in plenary	6 February 2019
Previous Committee opinions	
Date of subsidiarity monitoring consultation	N/A

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