

upgrade democracy

8th – 9th April, 2024

Regional Experts' Workshop: Brussels, Belgium

From resilient information ecosystem to resilient democracy

Key challenges and lessons learned for the
next EU Commission

Summary of observations
and key takeaways

Background and rationale

The **Reinhard Mohn Prize 2024 – Strengthening Democracy, Countering Disinformation**, is investigating good practices and innovative approaches to countering disinformation worldwide. Digital disinformation is an extremely multifaceted phenomenon. It is critical that we understand what is happening, where, and how– and that we tackle digital disinformation accordingly.

There are countless, successful, and impactful initiatives and organisations that are countering disinformation and building democratic resilience every day and in every corner of the world. We aim to uplift their voices and share their perspectives.

Our international research endeavour is supported and enriched by regional research engagements, consisting of workshops and bilateral discussions with decision-makers, experts, and relevant stakeholders, who we are bringing together in one comparatively central location in each region. The goal of these research trips is to create a space for exchange amongst experts and mutual learning of each other's contexts to jointly explore the landscape of counter-disinformation initiatives, pro-democracy mobilisations efforts, and highlight particularly promising examples and practices. In addition, networking with and among the respective actors aims to foster strong collaborations, alliances, and knowledge transfer, including assessing ideas for their potential to successfully strengthen counter-disinformation efforts in Europe and Germany.

In collaboration with GLOBSEC, Upgrade Democracy held its fifth research engagement in Brussels, Belgium, aiming to pinpoint key challenges and lessons for the upcoming EU Commission. With the Digital Services Act (DSA), the EU has made strides in regulating the digital information landscape in line with democratic principles and the rule of law. The crucial question remains: Are EU-level approaches adequate to foster a healthy information ecosystem? The one-day workshop convened a diverse group of around 40 experts including journalists, academics, policymakers, industry, and civil society representatives to evaluate regulatory and non-regulatory approaches to countering disinformation. Under Chatham House rules, participants reflected on next steps and recommendations for the next EU Commission and political priorities.

Observations and key takeaways

Perspectives on EU regulation

- The EU prides itself as an innovative regulatory power that has established reliable frameworks for consultations with civil society, academia, and industry players. Its regulatory measures often include test and trial periods for specific mandates, such as the obligation of very large online platforms to mitigate systemic risks. These get clarified, evaluated, and redefined through guidelines and reporting mechanisms.
- However, when EU regulation spills over to other countries, this usually only happens based on the initial regulation, not the continuous improvement. This creates a Counter-Brussels effect in countries outside the EU, where redress, consultation, and evaluation mechanisms are missing or underdeveloped.

Perspectives on online platforms

- Very large online platforms (VLOPs) take EU regulation – and its potential fines, seriously, at least serious enough to ensure a high presence of public policy staff across events, public, and non-public engagements. There is a sense that social media platforms understand that they need to do better.
- At the same time, understanding the consequences and exploring the boundaries or exploiting the regulatory wiggle rooms are different things. If there is a way to limit the scope of action, bypass obligations or implement them in a way that hinders oversight, platforms will find it. One critical example is the right to data access for research, which may in theory be available, but is in practice severely lacking.

Perspectives on transparency

- The demand for transparency remains unabated over time, despite the establishment of various entities and mechanisms aimed at enhancing transparency in recent years. Ironically, some of these entities dedicated to promoting transparency themselves lack transparency. Consequently, despite advancements, the persisting lack of transparency continues to contribute to power imbalances, particularly concerning information exchange between platforms and other sectors.
- Furthermore, it was emphasised that information transparency also encompasses the way information is presented. For example, the transparency reports issued by platforms are often shared as lengthy PDFs, drowning civil society in hard to process information.

Perspectives on civil society resilience

- There is widespread agreement on the pivotal role of civil society in countering disinformation, underscoring the need for greater efforts to bolster its capabilities, particularly in terms of financial resources. Whether governments or private entities (social media platforms) should bear the financial burden is debatable, with arguments for both emphasising different strengths and interests.
- In addition to that, financial structures that enable building up sustainable organisational structures are considered a key element to ensuring a resilient landscape of civil society organisation in the future.

Perspectives on governments

- While there is no question that governments have a role to play in addressing disinformation, it is imperative that this does not outweigh the whole-of-society approach needed in countering disinformation effectively.
- Continuous evaluation of potential government roles will be essential to minimise the risk of state actions undermining democratic principles and citizen rights. There is a prevailing notion that indirect strategies to counter disinformation, such as bolstering media pluralism, civil society resilience, and democracy through targeted funding, pose minimal risk of harm.
- With a looming Trump re-election scenario, collaboration and partnerships among democratic states of similar mindsets become increasingly pertinent in mitigating disinformation. Prioritising knowledge sharing and cooperation are crucial, alongside fostering a unified vision for strengthening democratic resilience.

Workshop Day

Setting the Scene: Is the EU Well-Prepared in the Fight Against Disinformation?

In the first session of the day, Cathleen Berger joined representatives from the EU DisinfoLab, Microsoft, and EDMO to assess what has changed in the European Union since the 2019 elections – and whether the EU is well prepared to counter disinformation ahead of the EU elections in June 2024. While the Digital Services Act (DSA), the Code of Practice on Disinformation, the AI Act and others were recognised as regulatory milestones, there was hesitancy in the room in terms of implementation, enforcement, and evaluation of impact.

All panellists raised critical elements that require more attention:

- **Funding:** There was an overall recognition that more funding for civil society work (online and offline) is necessary. At the same time, the Commission, member states, as well as the large platforms claim to face budget constraints. Participants circulated the idea to set up a “systemic risks fund” that supports civil society organisations in their efforts to mitigate systemic risks – financed through mandatory fees for large platforms.
- **Knowledge networks:** Often and repeatedly called for, yet hard to establish and maintain. The lack of a shared European public sphere and thriving knowledge-exchange networks across stakeholders, within sectors, and among organisations limits people’s ability to successfully coordinate and counter disinformation campaigns.
- **Content labelling and election oversight:** The EU’s guidelines on the mitigation of systemic risks for electoral processes contain many good elements, including better labelling of content on large online platforms. However, labels for political advertising may fall short in cases where political content is generated for entertainment, bypassing oversight mechanisms when it gains traction through unpaid users’ interaction.
- **Counter-Brussels effect:** EU regulation, if applied and/or adopted in third countries, risks lacking appropriate redress or evaluation mechanisms. The next Commission should pay more attention to extraterritorial application and expand its consultation mechanisms with civil society organisations beyond the EU’s borders.
- **Data access for international research:** The data access rights under the DSA still face obstacles in their implementation, while additional data points were opened (e.g. for ad libraries and more platforms), their accessibility, reliability, and usefulness are contested. In some cases, like LinkedIn, none of the research access requests were granted. In addition, researchers from outside the EU face access restrictions when joining research coalitions with European partners.

Governmental Approaches Towards a More Resilient Digital Public Sphere

The second session of the day was dedicated to exploring governmental approaches to building resilience across the EU. Government representatives from Latvia and Sweden shared observations, insights into their policies and structures, as well as lessons learned from countering foreign malign influence operations, notably from Russia, in their countries. Charlotte Freihse reflected on these efforts considering a recent international mapping of governmental efforts to counter disinformation, including e.g. the mitigation of false information, platform governance, and establishing dedicated agencies.

Key points that stood out in the discussion:

- **Whole-of-society approach:** It was emphasised repeatedly that disinformation is a multifaceted challenge that cannot be addressed by individual actors, selected policy fields, or through security and/or communications strategies only. Governments often view countermeasures as a menu of options, instead they should reframe their approach to a puzzle where each element adds to the whole.
- **Context matters:** Lessons learned from smaller countries might not apply to larger or more heterogenous contexts. However, their experiences of successful inter-ministerial, inter-agency, multistakeholder coordination of monitoring, analysing, and responding to disinformation attacks can and should inspire similarly comprehensive structures in other countries.
- **Foreign v. domestic disinformation:** There is a tendency to focus attention and direct most countermeasures to foreign influence operations. In part, this is because curbing foreign threats through security policies, sanctions, and/or restriction is comparatively straightforward, whereas domestic interference requires a much more delicate balance and higher standards to protect freedom of speech. Yet, participants acknowledged the concerning role of domestic agents and amplifiers.

When the Government Sleeps: Effective non-governmental approaches

The third session of the day reflected on both innovative and well-established practices implemented by organisations across the civil, private and media sector. Representatives from Alliance4Europe, Deutsche Welle's Vera.AI project and YouTube explored how they can foster cross-sector collaboration and knowledge sharing, especially regarding the use of new technologies in countering disinformation.

Key points that stood out in the discussion:

- **Sustainable collaboration:** Considering the pressure and increasing challenges faced by those engaged in the field, cooperation within and across organisations as well as sectors is more crucial than ever. While the anti-disinformation landscape in Europe is interconnected, there remains significant room for improvement in terms of collaboration and knowledge-sharing, necessitating substantial funding. This aligns with the need for sustainable financial structures, particularly within the civil society and media sectors, which could facilitate the consolidation of established practices instead of continually „innovating”.
- **Media development:** There is a broad consensus that the media sector plays a crucial role in countering disinformation, yet it faces numerous challenges simultaneously. These challenges include the loss of trust, fragmentation of audiences, the disappearance of the traditional gate-keeper role, heightened market competition in terms of both finance and audience share, and rapid technological changes. Furthermore, journalists are facing increasing pressure, not only due to direct attacks but also because of the need for new competencies - there is a lack of proficiency among journalists, particularly concerning data science skills.
- **The role of platforms:** In the lead-up to the EU elections, social media platforms have expressed heightened commitment to ensuring election integrity, protecting users, and promoting high-quality information. While there is undoubtedly more willingness to engage in dialogue than previously seen, the information provided by platforms regarding their measures still lacks sufficient transparency for understanding, let alone verification. The deficiencies highlighted by civil society organisations regarding AI-generated content, content moderation capabilities in non-English speaking regions, and safety mechanisms for platform users remain significant. Unfortunately, discussions have not shown any signs of improvement in these areas, at least not in time for the EU elections.

Challenges and Opportunities of Today: What's next for the next EU Commission?

The final panel discussion, featuring representatives from the European Parliament, European External Action Services and member of the Executive Board of the Bertelsmann Stiftung, Daniela Schwarzer, discussed next steps and recommendations for the upcoming European Commission, outlining key priorities, challenges, and opportunities moving forward.

Key observations that stood out in the discussion:

- **The EU's digital transition:** Navigating the digital transition of effective EU policymaking amidst the pandemic remains challenging. Although milestones such as the DSA, DMA, and AI Act have been established, questions persist regarding their effective implementation and enforcement, necessitating attention and resources.
- **Complex terminology:** Despite longstanding conversations, the struggle with definitions persists. The interdisciplinary nature of disinformation presents challenges for assigning competencies and responsibilities within governmental entities. The distinction between external and domestic disinformation, intended to delineate competencies, has proven blurry. Many governmental entities, including those at the EU level, must continually reassess their roles to enhance the effectiveness of their efforts.
- **Security policy dimension:** Disinformation is a security issue, but, critically, it also affects democracy and social cohesion. The forthcoming elections will shape governance and EU policies, with particular importance attached to the impact of the U.S. elections. The stability of long-term EU regulations and member state commitments is at risk, as is the role of the U.S. in countering disinformation.

Key observations that stood out in the discussion:

- **Establishing knowledge hubs:** The workshops consistently stressed the importance of knowledge-sharing, mostly by increasing the accessibility of established practices and knowledge for a wide range of actors.
- **Comprehensive vision:** Effectively countering disinformation requires a comprehensive approach, both in the long term and during crises. This entails fostering open discussions and embracing new tools to confront evolving forms of aggression. A mindset focused on building resilience will be essential across various policy sectors.
- **Increased resources:** It is evident that the EU must boost its funding to play a more significant role in this domain. Given geopolitical shifts, this necessity will extend to numerous sectors in the upcoming legislative term. The interconnectedness of disinformation with various policy realms underscores the imperative for such action. Moreover, this entails reevaluating current EU processes, such as recruitment, to effectively compete with the private sector and attract the skilled personnel needed for the future.

Bilateral Meetings

In bilateral meetings with representatives from civil society organisations and governments, several key points emerged:

- **Data access for research:** Concerning systemic risks, it was stressed that further research on metrics will be necessary. There is a concern about how Article 40 under the DSA serves its purpose and how independent researchers can effectively utilise it given their resource constraints. The case of Meta abandoning CrowdTangle is posing challenges for monitoring organisations that relied on it, while new tools exist, training and better insight into possible research designs is needed. This highlights the ongoing challenge of adapting to changes and acquiring new technical capacities with limited resources.
- **Beyond EU borders:** While there is broad support for international research access to platform data as well as acknowledgement of the need to reflect on unintended consequences beyond the EU's borders, doubts were raised whether such calls can generate enough attention on the political agenda in Brussels at present. There is a sense that the EU is preoccupied with implementing the DSA domestically, making it unlikely to focus much on external matters.
- **Economy and security:** This aligns with the perception that economic and security issues currently dominate and will continue to capture Brussels' attention in the future. There exists the perception that there is less capacity for addressing long-term strategic topics, leading to a more reactive rather than proactive agenda in Brussels.