

Addressing the Challenges of Fake News

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The printing and dissemination of spurious news, now commonly called 'fake news', is not in fact 'news': it is hardly a new problem. Hypocrisy, lies, persuasion, seduction and flattery have always been present in public life; for centuries, alternative facts and fake news have been part of politicians' and journalists' repertoire.

Nevertheless, instantaneous mass dissemination has only been reached in the digital era. The internet has given us access to a world of instant information; it has also enabled the spread of disinformation on a scale previously unseen. It is this new form of digital fake news that has become so pervasive in challenging our fundamental freedoms, such the freedom of speech and the freedom of information, and ultimately our very democratic systems themselves.

Media

The fragmentation of news media, in tandem with the digital revolution, and the trending decline of newspapers has contributed to the rise of fake news. Despite enjoying higher levels of trust, local and regional media have been hit particularly hard by the pressure for digital transformation and the decline in revenue from copy sales and advertising. The internet has dramatically lowered entry barriers for new media, but it has also empowered individuals to disseminate news in real-time, giving everyone a voice — and enabling everyone to become a potential 'citizen journalist'; this has led to a shift in consumers' reading habits. The shift from print to digital platforms has also brought about a shift in advertising revenues — once the lifeblood of newspapers and news organisations. The capitalisation of automated advertising monetisation which search and social media platforms provide also diverts revenue from real publishers. Along these lines, 'clickbait', whose main purpose is to attract attention and generate traffic — thereby garnering advertising revenue — is also a concern.

In this new context, news organisations should quickly seek innovative technologies and new business models to adapt to the digital revolution. For instance, media organisations should seek cooperation with each other and embrace new kinds of open business models which offer a paid unlimited subscription package for various news sources (as is the case with well-known platforms for music, films and series); people also tend to turn to social media for news consumption due to its aggregator element.

We need to reconstruct and empower the role of traditional media. For instance, we could imagine providing citizens a voucher to support a newspaper/media outlet of their choice or to develop a tax regime that would deduct part of the costs of our media consumption — a temporary measure in a transition phase to this new digital reality, and one in accordance with each Member States' rules. As a matter of fact, these kinds of measures would also expose citizens to trustworthy sources of information, which in turn would speed up the acquisition of digital literacy skills.

Our societies need professional, independent, ethical, investigative and facts-based journalism. Good journalists and editors, like politicians, are all custodians of freedom of speech and democracy.

Social networks

Social networks have allowed people to communicate and exchange information at a much greater speed and on a much wider scale than ever before, while publishing platforms have enabled anyone to easily create websites that contain information from self-published content. What is worrisome is that the same holds true for misinformation.

Social-media users tend to develop strong and well-defined communities around the news outlets they support, and they tend to make connections with likeminded people regardless of the geographic distance between them. Isolated communities (called 'echo chambers') filter the information people receive so that this information largely comes to reinforce existing opinions. The algorithms underpinning this phenomenon tend to relate people to others who are likeminded, rather than to create spaces for people to discuss, debate and find common ground. As a consequence, citizens are less exposed to pluralism and diverse opinions.

Social media companies should, therefore, boost their efforts to counter 'fake news'. But efforts should most of all be put on transparency and identification.

Transparency and accountability are needed regarding the algorithms that generate the aforementioned 'echo chambers' — not to disclose the algorithms themselves but to clearly explain to users how they select content to be displayed on their feed and to give users the option to tweak or to personalise.

Identification processes should be strengthened online just as they are offline to fight against internet trolls, bots and fake accounts. As a solutions-based, digital identities should be explored by means of creating personal digital certificates — a sort of 'digital' passport issued by a certification authority and valid between the user (person) and the social media service — which would only publicly display its origin. This would limit disinformation attempts by foreign powers and help criminal investigations and law enforcement.

Trust and truth

Fake news is also a reflection of a general decline in terms of political debate (i.e. more polarised), the constant use of alternative facts, the pack of lies and half-truths used by populists (the Brexit campaign is the prime example) — all leading, somehow, to an erosion of public confidence in our institutions. Confidence in institutions is important not only for the legitimacy of government as a whole but also for ongoing political developments and potential changes, and affects political and civic activism in both direct and indirect ways. However, post-truth politics is pervasive and easier to achieve via these new forms of communication.

Citizens tend to rely on likeminded peers, on religion and on anecdote as forms of evidence to underpin their own versions of truth. Alternative facts with regard to scientific evidence and historical events are also changing citizens' perception of the world we live in. Hence, the continuous promotion of scientific advice and evidence as a bastion against post-truth or post-trust times is key.

External influences, such as Russian propaganda, disinformation campaigns and continuous support for anti-European political forces, are net contributors to undermining both the European project as well as liberal values per se: namely, our political independence and sovereignty.

We should not, nevertheless, fall into the trap of seeking to impose truth through government authorities or private entities, but rather by means of the free exchange of ideas and arguments.

We, as a political party, are committed to continuing to build trust and confidence in democratic institutions by means of innovative practices for citizen engagement and awareness, transparency and ethical behaviour.

Media literacy and education

As more of us move to online sources for news, we have become more exposed to unreliable news sources, even as we remain ill-equipped to spot them. A Stanford University study recently found that more than 80% of students cannot identify sponsored content from 'real' news stories.

Education would address the problem of fake news on the demand side: too many users currently forward content without reading anything but the headline, and too few care about the content's source. In the past, when we needed trusted information, we consulted an encyclopaedia; nowadays, thanks to the internet, we have at hand a whole complex myriad of encyclopaedias. Our critical-thinking levels are too low for filtering such a vast amount of information, which leads us to the most simplistic and quickest fix: accepting the 'first on the list' link as an unexamined and trustworthy source.

Distinguishing what is true from what is not is thus a critical skill today, one which both the youth of today and future generations would greatly benefit from learning at an early age. By incorporating knowledge and training as to how to spot fake news and unreliable sources into education at all levels, we would be giving these young people a great benefit and a useful set of tools.

By standing unequivocally for the freedom of speech and freedom of information as essential elements of our values system, we the European People's Party call on the European Commission and EU Member States to:

- Adapt school curricula at all levels such that they strive towards better awareness of fake news, greater fact-checking and deeper critical thinking; kids will be the easiest to educate, and they will push parents to act. A greater push for digital literacy and education will be key;
- Develop more awareness-raising campaigns: i.e. massive information campaigns throughout Europe, similar to those that changed attitudes on the environment, aimed to educate the public as to the threat posed by fabricated online stories and internet trolls;
- Develop strong disinformation counter-strategies not based on the attempt to refute or argue against fake messages (this has merely proven to amplify them), but rather on reaching the target audience by first disseminating positive messages with strong emotional content, inclining people to share that content and thus denying to 'fake news' the attention it might otherwise garner;
- Improve the rules, enforcement and transparency surrounding online advertisement: ads should be clearly identified as ads and should provide information as to who is running them; better assess ad content and context by either automated or manual means; and increase advertisers' requirements in terms of authenticity;
- Explore tech-led solutions: artificial intelligence (AI) allows the automation of human tasks and, with machine-learning algorithms, can train itself over time to become more efficient in fact-checking; use blockchain technology to build a system for recording trust in media sources so that citizens can easily identify and proactively participate in that identification process;
- Foster and fund fact-checking initiatives at local level and set up a network of independent organisations at EU level helping Member States to combat fake news;

- Reinforce the European External Action Service's (EEAS) East StratCom Task Force by increasing considerably its staff and budgetary resources so that it can truly fulfil its mandate;
- Further support the ongoing work being done by think tanks and civil society organisations in highlighting the full nature and extent of this threat to liberal democracy; welcome innovative solutions by both the private and public sectors in finding ways to expose 'fake news' and disinformation and to helpfully distinguish between credible and non-credible sources;
- Ensure transparency for NGOs, lobbyists and political parties, especially with regard to funding.

Heading at a fast pace towards the 2019 European Parliamentary Elections, we, the European People's Party, are committed to working and cooperating with civil society, NGOs, other political forces, our member parties — at national, regional and local levels — and with EU institutions to create a 'democratic shield' against fake news and misinformation.

Where challenges and risks appear, opportunities also abound; this era of 'fake news' is thus an opportunity to become a more open, discerning, engaged and media-savvy society.

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