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Tackling disinformation: How to engage in the XXI century fight

Policy Brief

HIGHLIGHTS

01   Disinformation is as old as humanity but the ongoing transformation of the **(social) media paradigm** that goes hand in hand with an economic, social and political transformation, requires **imminent action**.

02   It has become evident during the **COVID19 pandemic** that platforms, institutions and governments have made great **efforts towards tackling disinformation** strategies but this trend must be maintained and strengthened.

03   There is an urgent need to encourage **media literacy** among citizens and to implement **self-regulatory mechanisms** but, above all, the chosen approach needs to be proportionate so **free speech** is protected at all times.

'Dissecting' the concept of disinformation

In the context of the COVID19 crisis, disinformation has been described by the UN as a '**poison** and humanity's other **enemy** in this crisis' (Possetti & Bontcheva, 2020). The OECD (2020) has argued that an 'outbreak of disinformation' was spread 'quickly, widely and inexpensively (...) endangering lives and hampering the recovery'.

In recent years, we have seen that citizens may no '*uninformed* but rather *disinformed*' (Humprecht *et al.*, 2020). Besides this, terms linked to the concept of disinformation such as '**post-truth**' and '**fake news**' have been a matter of interest -the use of the latter term has been highly controversial-. Furthermore, scholarship has also tried to clarify and shed some light on the difference in concepts such as *mis*information and *dis*information (*see figure 1*) (Braddock, 2020). Not only is there **low public trust in media** and **lack of resources** for fact-checking but also the barrier of traditional media gatekeepers does no longer exists (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Political actors, media themselves contribute to the definition of the political agenda (*agenda-setting*) and the interpretative frameworks (*framing*) within the topics of discussion. For that reason, media play a crucial role in the fight against disinformation (Tuñón Navarro *et al.*, 2019).

Media manipulation may lead to the decrease in trust of mainstream media and the increase of radicalization (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). From a users' perspective, the consumption of disinformation is driven by what has been coined as '**confirmation bias**' and '**motivated reasoning**' (Humprecht *et al.*, 2020).

Disinformation can be assessed in terms of its '**production**, **transmission** and **consumption**' as well as '**reproduction**'. Thus, online disinformation threatens democratic societies (Saurwein & Spencer-Smith, 2020). Perhaps the following may be a bit controversial but, as Richard Stengel -Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs during the Obama administration- argued in his book *Information wars*, what if democracy does no longer provide the convenient mechanisms?
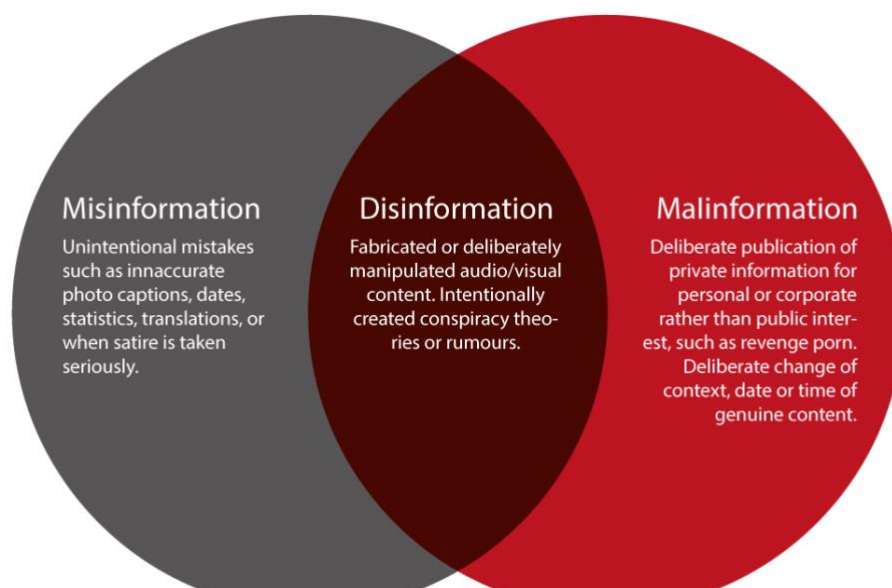

Figure 1 Types of information disorder. Source: LSE Media Policy Project | Truth, Trust and Technology Commission.

Why does disinformation constitute a threat to society?

While online actors have the ability to disseminate disinformation and *'deliberately mislead"* audience to achieve their own goals, (non)state actors use it so individual adopt certain believes or attitudes (Braddock, 2020). Regardless of the magnitude of disinformation actions, there is an **existent blocking capacity** and events like *Brexit*, the so-called 'migration crisis' or the Islamic terrorists attacks have placed on the table the **fragility of Western liberal democracies** (Milosevich, 2017). The term 'post-truth' reflects that now everything is questioned, anything can be true and anything can be false. Hence, literacy skills of users' need to be improved.

The increasing use of social media has 'promoted an explosion of disinformation' (Saurwein & Spencer-Smith, 2020):

- It is cheap to create as well as to produce.
- It can be rapidly disseminated as no barriers exist.
- The message can be spread across wide audiences.

What actions are being taken to tackle disinformation strategies?

Both Internet and social media have **'democratized'** the information and individuals can produce information at any point in time and space. This implies a drop in quality and the misidentification of information and knowledge (Milosevich, 2017). **National governments** are becoming progressively concerned about disinformation and have implemented or are working on the implementation of regulation (Morgan, 2018). The '**momentum'** for national governments to take action is now developing into real measures such as transparency portals. However, this can be somewhat controversial and it can be argued that politicians may be have interest in propagating certain frames (Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Tambini, 2017).

Within the EU system of multilevel governance some **EU initiatives** have been carried out too. In 2018, the European Commission set up a high-level group of experts (HLEG) to advise on policy initiatives to counter the spread of fake news and online disinformation. The insurance of **freedom of expression and democratic debate** have been the central element of the European response to disinformation and during the COVID19 pandemic, it called for more 'coordinated action' while preserving democratic values.

Platforms like **Facebook or Google** hold certain **responsibility** in this and have long be criticized for not implementing effective measures against this phenomenon. They have also introduced measures to help users make a better judgement of the sources. For instance, during the 2020 US election Instagram hid the 'recent' tab so as to help prevent the spread of harmful content and Twitter added labels to tweets that claimed victory before final results were official. Facebook is now working with fact-checking institutions (Morgan, 2018) relied on major US media outlets, put a ban on US political ads and, more specifically, it banned ads claiming false victory.

With that in mind, if information is **power**, disinformation is an abuse of it and countering disinformation is one of the real challenges of our century.

Disinformation: a threat to national security

Disinformation is considered to be a **hybrid threat** as these include military and non-military means. According to NATO, hybrid methods have **blurred 'the lines** between war and peace and attempt to sow doubt in the minds of target populations' (NATO, 2019).

The intensity on their use has increased and it poses a **serious threat** for states. For instance, NATO has prepared an strategy to 'be **prepared, deter** hybrid threats **and defend** any Ally against any type of threat'.

Disinformation attacks can be considered a threat to national security and in order to counter this attacks, 'intersectoral, regional and international **cooperation'** is required (Marović, 2019).

Recommendations

Considering every point that has been made in this document, the following is to be considered as recommendations that can be follow to keep fighting against this phenomena:

- ***Long-term and unified policies are a cornerstone in the process***: Now that measures to tackle this issue are being implemented, there needs to be collaboration at all levels (national European and international) so the results are consistent and reliable.

- ***Persistence in effective actions to counter misinformation and disinformation strategies***: As it could be perceived during the last US elections, companies actions are effective and, therefore, they need to be persistent in this goal.

- ***Development of open data and educational tools to increase citizens resilience***: Political parties can contribute by providing transparent and reliable data to citizens while local and national governments must develop educational tools. Citizens themselves need to be capable of discerning accurate and non-accurate or false information and disseminating truthful news coming from reliable sources.

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