photo: Wokandapix

Report of HLEG on Fake News and Online Disinformation

ABSTRACT

This report refers about the policy initiatives to counter fake news and disinformation spread online and the techniques of the European Commission to prevent this issue. The HLEG, a high-level group of experts created by the European Commission in 2018, prepared a report with best practicies and suitable responses to disinformation. The main responses were divided into five pillars as transparency, media and information literacy, empowering users and journalists, safeguard of the diversity of the European news media ecosystem and continued research.

KEY WORDS

Fake news. Disinformation. HLEG. European commission. Report. Media literacy.

In the current media situation that is connnected with loads of information, opinions and news it is really important to decode fake news, hoaxes and online disinformation. The world should take care about the flow of information coming to people who are not able to recognize the truth from illusion, the good and bad sides of issues. One of the most important topics is to define Fake News and Online Disinformation and what they stand for. Both terms have a shared understanding of disinformation as a phenomenon that goes well beyond the term fake news. Disinformation can include all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit. These terms overcomes each other. Fake news and Online Disinformation are the main topics of a high-level group of experts (the HLEG) that was set up in January 2018 by the European Commission. There are 39 members of the High Level Expert Group focused on fake news chaired by Professor Madeleine De Cock Buning. Their mission is to advise on policy initiatives to counter fake news and disinformation spread online. The outcome of the HLEG is a report with practices and principles how to suitably respond to Fake news and Online disinformation. The report is divided into several chapters.

Defining a problem

Media and the freedom of speech are tightly connected and they are part of the democratic system in various countries. That means that human beings can get various information from social networks, media, or public opinions. All this information sometimes leads to disinformation. However, disinformation represents risks and threats that we have to bear and collectively confront to support full democratic, societal and economical or technological progress while respecting and accepting freedom of speech. Current debates about fake news should be discussed in a way, which includes all forms and a spectrum of information types. First of all, we can mention low-risk forms starting with honest mistakes by reporters, partisan political discourse

ending with bait headlines. Secondly, high-risk forms include the instance of foreign states or domestic groups that would undermine the political process in the EU using malicious fabrications, infiltration of grassroots groups etc. The risk of harm is serious following threats to democratic political processes, such as health, education, finance and other sectors. HLEG reports avoid the term fake news for two reasons: the term cannot cover the whole complex problem of disinformation because usually the content is not fully fake but used for astroturfing, manipulation, trolling, targeted advertising and much more. It can involve an array of digital behaviour that is about circulation of disinformation like spanning, posting, commenting, sharing etc. Moreover, the term fake news is according to the report also misleading by politicians and their supporters, who use it to dismiss coverage that they find disagreeable. If we are talking about the term disinformation, this term includes forms of speech that fall outside already illegal forms of speech such as hate speech, incitement to violence or defamation but can nonetheless be harmful. These are current problems with wider political, social, civic and media issues in Europe. Many of them are slightly moving to digital media and have these four aspects: the evolving nature of disinformation, dissemination patterns and techniques requiring a regularly updated and evidence-based understanding of the scale, scope and impact of the problem in order to calibrate appropriate responses.

Measures already taken by stakeholders

As we described earlier, digital disinformation is a multifaceted problem that is trying to be solved. It is related to many sections like platforms, news publishers, broadcasters, fact-checkers and civil society. Good practices tend to fall into three major categories: transparency, trust-enhancement, and media and information literacy.

The first category that is the most frequent type of intervention tends to challenge disinformation by producing initiatives which helps to create resilience among citizens and empower the various actors impacted. For example, online platforms try to identify and remove illegitimate accounts, integrate signals for credibility and trustworthiness in ranking algorithms and include recommendations of alternative content. Then, they attempt to de-monetize for-profit fabrication of false information and collaborate with independent source and also fact-checking organisations.

The second category – trust-enhancing practices and algorithm changes include various types of measures that leverage artificial intelligence and machine learning to tackle specific facets of the disinformation phenomenon. In this case, for example press organisations are looking into other measures, such as credibility indexes. Print press organisations and broadcasters are making an effort to enforce certain trust-enhancing practices such as pointing to good public sources in the digital environment. Journalism guidelines are issued by individual news media, international organisations such as the Federation of Journalists. The content is devoted to deontological codes, ethics and standards to guarantee quality in the methods in which news is produced.

The purpose of the third category Media and information literacy is to bolster prevention and to reduce the appeal of disinformation and conspiracy theories. In this area civil society organisations are really active. In particular, they develop media literacy actions and programmes including experimantal collaborations with other stakeholders. The aim is to help the younger generations to become conscious consumers of news within the new digital ecosystems.

Key principles and general, short and long-term objectives

One of the key principles is the freedom of expression, it is guaranteed by several documents not only in the European Union but also in constitutions, international pacts and it is the fundamental right of human beings. Both the Charter and the Convention affirm Europe's particular constitutional commitment to freedom of expression and the right to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. In terms of general objectives the aim of responses should be to increase the long-term resilience of EU citizens, communites, news organisations and to help them proactively recognize various forms of disinformation. Secondly, to ensure responses to disinformation, which require constant monitoring of the evolving nature of the problems at hand and evaluate their efficiency. The HLEG believes that the collaboration of stakeholders will help to create the best responses, minimize legal regulatory interventions and will avoid politically dictated privatization.

How to respond and react?

The HLEG has decided to be focused on five intervention areas by distinguising between actions designed around five pillars:

1. enhance transparency of the online digital ecosystem involving an adequate and privacy-compliant sharing of data about the systems that enable their circulation online;
2. promote and sharpen the use of media and information literacy approaches to counter disinformation issues and help users navigate the media environment;
3. develop tools for empowering users and journalists and foster a positive engagement with fast-evolving information technologies;
4. safeguard the diversity and sustainability of the European news media ecosystem;
5. calibrate the effectiveness of the responses through continuous research on the impact of disinformation in Europe to evaluate the measures taken by different actors and constantly adjust the necessary responses.

If we are talking about the key element in the response to digital disinformation, HLEG considers to be transparency. As a cross-cutting issue that concerns the whole digital media value chain and aims at making news production is transparency opaque with a view to supporting users' ability to recognize between journalistic quallity content and various kinds of disinformation. It may strengthen the impact of media literacy actions by providing users and also help to provide more information about factual claims. According to that, users can better evaluate the veracity of the news they access online. Overall, the European Commission with Member States, should support cooperation between media organisations, academic researchers, advertising industry and civil society. Such cooperation should in particular focus on transparency of source funding, then online news sources and journalistic processes and fact-checking, source-checking with verification practices.

Media Information Literacy (MIL) has in this digital age of media acquired a strategic importance for digital citizenship such as basic educational competencies. It is a starting point for developing critical thinking, personal practices for discourse online and also offline world. MIL includes an active responsible participation in the online public sphere. The speed of change is huge and that is the reason why nowadays the information age requires life-long learning. HLEG reports state it is a preventive, rather than a reactive solution. For media and information literacy to be effective, it must be implemented on a massive scale in school curricula and in teacher training curricula, with clear methods of evaluation and cross-country comparison. These key competences are expected to serve as a long-standing reference for all future educational and curricula reforms in the EU and Member State levels. According to HLEG in an area of Media and Information Literacy should be effectively working and educating in the fields on regional, international and cross-country level to cause awareness. HLEG also underlines the importance of regular reporting about this issue from Member States and all relevant stakeholders in order to foster evaluation.

Empowering users of platforms' services, both citizens and media professionals, is a key element to increase the resilience of society to various forms of disinformation. To fulfill this goal it is necessary to develop and make available tools that will show quality signals for example identity labels, content labels, source transparency indicators etc. Increasing the users' control over the content they can search online through the online filtering system aimed at facilitating the display of the widest possible range of relevant news and information. HLEG tries to build an effective fast-checking system with tools that provides users relevant information in real time about possibly false information online, its sources and other relevant elements of trending and viral spread. Tools should look like a platform (e. g. applications, plug-ins etc.), or trainings for journalists in order to reduce risks of disinformation making its way into their reporting activities. HLEG considers to be an effective tool also innovative media projects funded by the private sector. Projects should be oriented to empower journalists and extend them into other Member States. Another way to deal with disinformation are artificial intelligence, augmented newsrooms, conversation journalism, language technologies and big data for media.

Diversity and sustainability of the news media ecosystem is also an important part of achieving the common goal, that can be hopefully achieved without direct or indirect censorship. It presupposes a critical, engaged and well-informed readership. This is an area which requires a commitment by public authorities to defend fundamental principles, freedom of expression, free press and media pluralism. Public authorities should commit to provide an enabling environment for substantial media pluralism through a combination of the basic right to free expression and diverse information and also support of the private sector of media. Press freedom should be set as a journalistic standard. Diversity and sustainability of the news media ecosystem is also important part of achieving the common goal. The EU needs to step up its role in terms of media innovation, one of the projects can be The Horizon 2020 programme that should include more specific media-related calls in general and for innovations dealing with disinformation. HLEG also says that at the national level it is not appropriate to have the governmental control of digital media and digital disinformation. Independence of media is imperative for Europe's democratic foundations.

Mentioning process and evaluation, the HLEG comission believes that, as a first step, the best responses are likely to be those driven by multi-stakeholders and their collaboration. European Commission is considered to be the one that can promote a general, European-wide Code of Practices reflecting the perspective roles and responsibilities, especially online platforms, media organisations, fact-checking and research organisations. In the Code of Practices should be established such a multi-stakeholder approach as: clearly identify the target stakeholders and aim for the widest possible uptake across the EU, set out clear rules and provide a periodical review in the light of the progess and efficiency, establish a mechanism for an independent and permanent evaluation of the measures taken by the parties to ensure its implementation, ensure coordination with EU Centres for research on disinformation, take stock of what exists already across all stakeholders, identify gaps and fill them with a particular view on platforms, not replace existing self-regulatory systems, consider existing mechanisms of implementation, for example regarding trust and transparency indicators, and synchronize with them. These key principles were agreed by HLEG as a starting point for defining specific rules for the proposed Code of Practice. The principles are attached to platforms. They are referring to adapting their advertising policies whilst preventing incentives that leads to disinformation. Platforms should also ensure the transparency and public accountability of users's data for advertising and also realise that sponsored content is distinguished from other content. They should take the necessary measures to enable privacy-compliant access to data for fact-checking and research activities and make available their users advanced settings controls to empower them to customise their online experience. Important is also cooperation with public and private European news outlets, where together they take effective measures to improve the visibility of trustworthy news and where it is appropriate, trending news items should be accompanied by related news suggestions. Platforms should provide user-friendly tools to enable users to link up with trusted fact-checking sources and allow users to exercise the right to reply. Those platforms that apply flagging and trust systems that rely on users should design safeguards against abuse by users and all should cooperate by providing relevant data on the functioning of their services including data for independent investigation in order to find a common approach to adress the amplification of disinformation.

The HLEG advises the Commission, in the report, against simplistic solutions. They should avoid any kind of censorship. The HLEG's recommendations aim instead to provide short-term responses to the most pressing problems, longer-term responses to increase societal resilience to disinformation, and a framework for ensuring that the effectiveness of these responses is continuously evaluated, while new evidence-based responses are developed.

Bibliography and sources

A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation. Report of the independent High level Group on fake news and online disinformation. Luxembourg : Publications Office of the European Union, 2018.

Ľubica Bôtošová