

LATIF PROJECT

DEFENDING EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY

MAIN THREATS AND MEASURES TO
COUNTERING DISINFORMATION

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Executive Summary

Disinformation poses a significant threat to the integrity of European values, undermining democratic processes and influencing voter behavior. This policy brief for the LATIF Project¹, funded by the European Media and Information Fund², reviews the current state of disinformation threats and policy measures designed to counteract them. It explores the impact of disinformation on the democratic process, highlights trends observed during recent EU elections, and provides an initial set of recommendations for future actions. These recommendations consider innovation and the impact of advanced technologies as means of addressing disinformation. Accordingly, the LATIF project, which aims to develop a tool to detect bias and disinformation, represents a key initiative in this context, leveraging advanced methodologies to enhance the effectiveness of fact-checking and safeguard election integrity. The LATIF project, led by Luiss Datalab in collaboration with the University of Dundee, the University of Liverpool, and T6 Ecosystems, aims to counter disinformation by exploring innovative approaches, in particular leveraging the Analysis of Competing Hypotheses (ACH)³ methodology in the fact-checking domain. This project seeks to counter and control cognitive bias in the fact-checking process, developing a new digital tool based on ACH. This tool is designed to empower and improve fact-checking organizations' decision-making processes, promoting impartiality and enhancing public trust in fact-checked information.

¹ <https://latifproject.eu/>

² <https://gulbenkian.pt/emifund/>

³ The Analysis of Competing Hypotheses (ACH) is a structured analytical technique developed by Richards J. Heuer, Jr. for evaluating multiple hypotheses by systematically assessing the consistency of all available evidence with each hypothesis. This method helps minimize cognitive biases by focusing on disconfirming rather than confirming hypotheses, thus aiding in making more objective and reliable decisions.

Policy measures at a glance

Disinformation has emerged as a critical challenge during European elections, attracting significant interest from policy, academia and practitioners (Reuters Institute, 2024). Disinformation campaigns exploit social media platforms to spread false or misleading information rapidly, aiming to disrupt the electoral process. Studies show that such campaigns can erode public trust in democratic institutions and influence voter behavior by disseminating false narratives (OECD, 2024; Matasick, C., C. Alfonsi and A. Bellantoni, 2020). The literature underscores the need for robust countermeasures which safeguard election integrity, including policy interventions and technological solutions. In particular, the role of social media remains paramount in the rapid dissemination of false information. Several key studies highlight the complexities of disinformation in the context of European elections (OECD, 2024; NIS Cooperation Group, 2024; Reuters Institute, 2024; EU Disinfolab, 2023; EU Commission, 2024).

In recent years, the European Union has taken significant legislative steps to address the challenge of disinformation, recognizing its impact on democratic processes and the integrity of elections. The Digital Services Act (DSA) is the cornerstone of this legislative framework, imposing new obligations on online platforms to increase transparency in political advertising and remove illegal content. This Act is part of a broader effort to ensure a safer and more responsible online environment. By demanding greater accountability from online platforms, the DSA aims to mitigate the spread of disinformation by making it harder for malicious actors to use these platforms to manipulate public opinion.

The DSA is complemented by the strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation, initially established in 2018 and reinforced in 2022. This co-regulatory framework involves both public and private sector stakeholders, enhancing scrutiny of ad placements, improving transparency, and empowering users and fact-checkers. These commitments are crucial for creating a more resilient information ecosystem, capable of withstanding disinformation campaigns. The Code is evolving into a co-regulatory code of conduct under the DSA for Very Large Online Platforms. Moreover, the European Democracy Action Plan outlines comprehensive measures to protect democratic processes from disinformation and foreign interference. This Plan emphasizes the need for a coordinated approach, involving governments, technology platforms, and civil society to counter disinformation effectively.

A significant component of the legislative train is the European Media Freedom Act, which aims to safeguard media pluralism and independence within the EU. This regulation establishes a common framework for media services, ensuring that they operate free from undue influence and that their operations are transparent and accountable.

In addition to these regulations, the EU has been proactive in fostering media literacy among its citizens. Recognizing that technological measures alone are insufficient, the EU has prioritized educational initiatives to equip citizens with the skills to critically evaluate information.

The LATIF project intends to support the implementation of these regulatory measures by creating a tool that enhances the impartiality of fact-checking. By reducing cognitive biases and improving the analytical rigor of fact-checking processes, the LATIF project contributes to the EU's goal of creating a transparent and accountable online environment. The project's collaboration with fact-checkers, journalists, and technology experts ensures that the tools developed are practical, effective, and aligned with the needs of the broader community.

In summary, the EU's holistic approach and its efforts in fighting against disinformation involves a multifaceted approach that comprises stringent regulations, co-regulatory frameworks and technological innovation. Pioneering projects, like LATIF, contribute to these EU efforts in safeguarding the integrity of elections and the democratic process by creating a more transparent, accountable, and resilient information ecosystem.

Hybrid Threats and Cognitive Security

In the broader context of evolving security challenges, the concept of hybrid threats has gained prominence. Hybrid threats encompass a blend of conventional and unconventional tactics employed by state and non-state actors to achieve strategic objectives. These threats include military aggression, cyber attacks, economic pressure, and information manipulation to create complex and multidimensional challenges. The EU has recognized the significance of hybrid threats and has integrated this understanding into its security and defense policies.

The rise of hybrid warfare, particularly highlighted by Russia's actions in Crimea and the broader geopolitical landscape, underlines the need for a comprehensive approach to counteract these threats. The EU's Joint Framework on Countering Hybrid Threats and the establishment of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats exemplify efforts to address these multifaceted challenges. Cognitive security, a subset of hybrid threats, focuses on protecting the cognitive domain of individuals and companies from manipulation and exploitation. This involves safeguarding the decision-making processes, beliefs, and perceptions of individuals and communities from malicious influence activities. The European Union Institute for Security Studies plays a vital role in developing methodologies and tools to address threats emerging in the information space, contributing significantly to the EU's strategic engagement in fostering cognitive security. In addition, through numerous ongoing initiatives, the EU has fostered the idea of hybrid threats, focusing on disinformation and fake news. Notable in this regard is the Joint Framework on Countering Hybrid Threats, established in 2016, which provides a comprehensive approach to counteract these threats, encompassing a wide range of coordinated actions aimed at protecting the EU and its member states from this kind of interference. In 2018, the Joint Communication on Hybrid Threats further reinforced these efforts by outlining specific strategies and actions to enhance the EU's resilience. These measures are complemented by the Strategic Compass, a document steering the EU's security and defense policy, which underscores the importance of a coordinated and integrated approach.

Policy implications and the role of the LATIF Project

In this context, the LATIF project is integral to the broader policy landscape which addresses disinformation in the EU by enhancing cognitive security. A critical aspect of the LATIF project is its co-creation process in developing the bias detection tool. This process involves close collaboration and consultation with various stakeholders, including fact-checkers, journalists, and technology experts, to ensure that the tool is both practical and effective. The co-design approach ensures that the tool is tailored to the actual needs and workflows of fact-checkers, making it more user-friendly, fit-for-purpose and effective in its applications.

The project began with a qualitative assessment of fact-checkers' understanding and identification of cognitive bias. Insights from this co-creation assessment informed the design of a digital infrastructure to improve the fact-checking process. The usefulness of this tool has been assessed through feedback from fact-checkers. The ultimate goal is to develop structured analytical techniques using argument technologies to enhance impartiality in fact-checking and increase effectiveness in offering the public a means to distinguish truth from false information.

Researchers involved in the LATIF project have conducted focus groups with sector representatives, including professionals from RAI, Pagella Politica, NewsGuard, and La Stampa, at Luiss. Findings from these focus groups help train the algorithm by understanding common biases and improving the tool's design. The project is currently in the phase of conducting further focus groups with UK-based professionals, providing them with access to the tool for testing and feedback. This iterative process ensures the development of a robust and user-friendly tool that meets the needs of fact-checkers and enhances the integrity of the fact-checking process.

The tool being developed is a Chrome extension designed to analyze texts for bias and disinformation. It will function within the browser, highlighting potential biases and providing analysis before users click on links, thus preventing legal issues associated with post-click data handling. Privacy concerns have been meticulously addressed to ensure the plugin does not track typing or search histories, thereby safeguarding user privacy.

As mentioned earlier, the integration of the Analysis of Competing Hypotheses (ACH) methodology into the fact-checking process is a cornerstone of the LATIF project. ACH provides a structured approach to evaluating competing narratives and evidence, helping fact-checkers systematically consider alternative explanations and reduce the impact of cognitive biases on their conclusions. By incorporating ACH, the LATIF project aims to enhance the rigor and reliability of fact-checking, making it more impervious to manipulation and more credible to the public. This design choice allows the tool to seamlessly integrate into the fact-checkers' workflow, providing real-time analysis of texts for bias and disinformation as they browse the web.

Conclusions and main recommendations

Disinformation remains a pervasive threat to European democracies. Recent analysis of EU elections reveals several key trends in disinformation. Campaigns often target specific political candidates or parties, with the intent of swaying public opinion and disrupting electoral outcomes, frequently these campaigns are linked to foreign actors seeking geopolitical gain (EEAS, 2024; EDMO, 2024).

One major trend is the strategic targeting of contentious social issues, such as immigration, public health and climate crisis. Various false narratives emerged during the EU Parliament elections, aiming to polarize public opinion and undermine trust in authorities. In addition, it has been observed users' targeting for vote abstention. It has been also highly observed a massive use of AI to create false electoral campaigns, as the Russian information overload^[1], and the "matrioska"^[2] information operation or the well known Doppelgänger^[3] operation by Russian companies Struktura and Social Design Agency. Social media platforms have become primary battlegrounds for these disinformation campaigns. Studies have shown varying success rates in mitigating the spread of false information. Facebook and Instagram often use fact-checking labels and reduce the distribution of false content, while X and YouTube have lower response rates to limit disinformation spreading, with significant portions of disinformation remaining unaddressed. A report analyzing platform responses during the 2024 European elections revealed that YouTube took no visible action regarding 75% of disinformation content identified by fact-checkers, while X took no visible action in 70% of cases (Maldita, 2024). The rise of generative AI to create and disseminate disinformation poses new challenges. The European Commission has recognized this threat and has recommended specific mitigation measures for platforms. According to the latest monitoring report in March 2024, Meta has implemented significant measures for the European Parliament elections. These measures include using AI tools to detect and mitigate disinformation, enhancing content moderation practices, and providing transparency in political advertising. Meta's policies now require advertisers to disclose if their ads contain AI-generated or digitally altered content. Additionally, Meta has conducted threat ideation sessions to identify and mitigate potential adversarial tactics specific to the elections, ensuring that their platforms remain secure and trustworthy. The structural indicators developed by the EU's Code of Practice (CoP) on Disinformation serve as benchmarks to evaluate the effectiveness of these measures. These indicators, part of the CoP monitoring framework, help assess platforms' performance in combating disinformation by providing a comprehensive overview of their progress and areas of improvement. By aligning their strategies with these indicators, platforms like Meta ensure they meet the regulatory requirements and best practices recommended by the EU.

4 <https://www.disinfo.eu/outreach/our-webinars/20-june-operation-overload-please-check-how-pro-russian-propagandists-try-to-manipulate-newsrooms/>

5 <https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/publications/matriochka-une-campagne-prorusse-ciblante-les-medias-et-la-communaute-des-fact-checkers>

6 <https://www.disinfo.eu/doppelganger-operation/>

To conclude, despite these efforts, more robust regulatory frameworks and increased international cooperation are needed. From a policy perspective, comprehensive and coordinated efforts to address the issue are needed. Legislative measures like the Digital Services Act and the strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation, combined with innovative projects like LATIF, represent significant steps forwards and towards safeguarding democracy. Governments need to enhance their communication strategies and involve diaspora communities to increase credibility. Instead of censorship, alternative solutions are required to prevent the spread of misleading information.

Investments in media literacy through educational initiatives and public awareness campaigns are crucial to equip citizens with skills to evaluate information effectively and critically.

Supporting fact-checking initiatives like LATIF, which enhance the impartiality and rigor of fact-checking processes, is essential. Enforcing and refining regulations to ensure online platforms increase transparency in political advertising and remove illegal content is vital. Platforms should provide clear, publicly accessible reports on their efforts in combating disinformation.

Strengthening international cooperation is crucial to address the global nature of disinformation campaigns. Collaborative efforts between governments, technology platforms, and civil society are essential for effective mitigation. Developing advanced analytical tools and requiring social media platforms to clearly label AI-generated content are necessary steps.

Accordingly, the LATIF project represents a forward-thinking approach to countering disinformation. By leveraging advanced methodologies and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, the project provides valuable tools and insights that can help safeguard democracy and ensure the integrity of the electoral process. As the disinformation landscape evolves, initiatives like LATIF will be crucial in maintaining the resilience and trustworthiness of democratic institutions.

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