

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STAKEHOLDERS AND POLICY MAKERS TACKLING INFORMATION DISORDER

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the advent of the new information and communications technologies expands, the quality of the information environment is an issue that becomes of paramount importance for every person and society. The veracity of the disseminated information is a big challenge nowadays, both for those that spread it, as well as for those that consume it. The fake news phenomenon gains increasing importance and in the Internet, fabricated stories have become a powerful weapon for causing information disorder. However, combating its deleterious effects requires not only careful study of the nature, channels of dissemination and impacts of fake news, but the possible paths and instruments for fighting it.

This policy paper summarises the key findings from up-to-date performance analyses of European organisations and initiatives fighting fake news. The idea behind is to formulate a list of recommendations addressing key stakeholders that can influence the process and regain the trust of the public in social media and in freedom of expression in general. The policy paper is the side-result of the activities taken in the COMPACT Project. The COMPACT Project represents a Cooperation and Support Action under the EC H2020 umbrella, which deals with broader themes of social media and convergence. However, considering the urgency of the issue of information disorder (of which fake news and hoaxes are an integral part) encapsulated and distributed especially via online platforms, a subgroup of COMPACT Project researchers carried out fast-track and first ever done performance analysis of effectiveness and efficiency of organisations and initiatives fighting fake news and hoaxes in Europe throughout November 2017 - January 2018. This initiative, supported by the Project Officer Alberto Rabbachin, also reflects an urgent need to engage the academic community more deeply and expressly in developing fact- and research-based policy proposals and actions together with other stakeholders.

Key findings

The activities of fact checking and debunking organizations and initiatives (FC-DOIs) represent an unalienable part of the process of the fight against fake news across Europe and worldwide. These grass root initiatives should be supported and encouraged to develop.

The biggest reported challenges for FC-DOIs include insufficient stakeholders' awareness on the issues related to information disorder and lack of adequate resources. FC-DOIs should be encouraged to publicise widely information about their activities, methods and outcomes accomplished. On the other hand, the appropriate financing of these organizations depending on their ethical and transparent behaviour should be perceived as an important element of the successful fight against fake news.

Although there is a clear general goal set for all of the FC-DOIs, there is a lack of clarity on the part of the organizations in the sub-goals and objectives that concern the internal processes of the organizations' operation. This conclusion demands considerable improvement of the organizational culture and practices pursued by these structures.

The number of debunked news/hoaxes (last three-months average) varies highly across countries and is very much context dependent – influenced by both general political situation and ad hoc events such as election campaigns.

Majority of FC-DOIs are 'specialized' in one type of content only. Specific visual content (photos, YouTube), although known to have far greater impact in the proliferation of fake news than text, is addressed to a lesser extent.

The extent to which automated and semi-automated software are employed in these projects is very low, although there are already complete end-to-end computational fact-checking solutions available. Most of the FC-DOIs do pay attention to revision of tools, but there is still a significant number of them that have not yet considered this option. IT companies can help in this respect providing advice and technical support to these organizations.

The majority of the FC-DOIs select their target sources and media by some predefined criteria, the most common of which is 'public interest about the information'. Furthermore, the majority FC-DOIs employ some mechanisms for information source evaluation (credibility, independence, etc). However, even those that do pay attention to the independence of sources rely on human-expertise and subjective evaluations only.

Almost all of the projects envisage political and human impact, and most of them are aware of the societal impact the work may have in general. Yet most of the FC-DOIs do not track, monitor and evaluate any impact, which may jeopardize in practice the long-term results and generally the far reaching effect envisaged.

Many of the FC-DOIs also provided evidence of agenda-setting impact (e.g. legacy media referencing the results of their work) as part of their effectiveness assessment. This, in and of itself, speaks of the importance of fact-checking efforts in complementing the existing strategies for combating information disorder. Therefore, FC-DOIs should become allies in the general struggle against fake-news together with all other stakeholders.

Considering the distribution of users reached over the duration of a given project, it can be noticed that most of the projects have similar rate of expansion of their user base, with the oldest projects having significantly larger audience.

Little considerations were reported with regard to sustainability plans of FC-DOIs.

There appears to be strong collaboration among most of the European FC-DOIs reported by the respondents of the survey. However, there also appears a significant overlapping in tackling information disorder, when there are countries with two or even more separate FC-DOIs.

Transparency of the majority of FC-DOIs (in terms of methodology, funding and operation) in Europe remains blurred. There is little willingness to be transparent about key information by the majority of FC-DOIs in Europe. This fact poses the issue of agreeing on the appropriate guarantees for higher openness and transparency of the activities of these organizations, more intense civil society and public involvement.

The number of people engaged in the fact-checking process varies greatly among organizations (from 3 to 30). We noted that almost two thirds FC-DOIs report increase of their staff.

There is a deep interest and potential for involvement into the regulatory issues related to the combating of information disorder online on both national and European level. National and European strategies in this respect should be elaborated with the participation of FC-DOIs.

We determined the following three main components that any future fact-checking system and its performance assessment would need to integrate: Information gathering, Decision-making and Response.

Key Recommendations

Our key recommendations address the main stakeholders including FC-DOI on whose active cooperation the successful accomplishment of the fight against information disorder depends:

1. The public sector

On the basis of our observations and conclusions, a case can be made that efficient and effective efforts for combating information disorder may demand more focused and persistent efforts on the part of the states and the European institutions and may soon become an element of some general set of cybersecurity measures. In this respect, the idea of enlarging the scope of the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime through the adoption of a new additional protocol or amending the existing *Additional Protocol to the Convention on Cybercrime*, concerning the criminalisation of acts of a racist and xenophobic nature committed through computer systems can be considered as a possible solution in extreme cases or extreme situations of information disorder. In the EU context, perhaps the revision of the Audio-visual Media Services Directive leading to harmonised measures against fake news distribution could be seen as a proper solution.

Fact-checking and debunking activities, although helpful, do not solve the urgent and persistent problems with fake news and hoaxes which imperil basic social principles and values. There is a need for a fundamental change in the communication policies (e.g. causal explanations), educational policies (e.g. in media literacy curricula) and in the regulatory policies and practices. Effective implementation of the policies adopted through a complex set of measures is mostly needed on a national and European level. The elaboration of such strategies should be premised on the efforts of all stakeholders including FC-DOIs.

2. The business sector

The business sector should follow and support the overall process of combating fake news and hoaxes including through the direct support of the FC-DOIs. Businesses should be vigilant and creative in responding adequately. They should strive to bootstrap the adoption of new software solutions and to facilitate the technical support and advice to the organizations that target and debunk fake news.

Although social platforms are used to promote and disseminate the work of the FC-DOIs, an interactive mode of promotion could be an obvious point where improvements can be sought and achieved. Premises and practices from the business world may largely contribute in the pursuit of this goal as well.

3. Civil society

The efforts of a stronger and independent civil society should underpin the process of awareness-raising among stakeholders and the public at large in order to give more credibility to the FC-DOIs work and raise the publicity of the issues related to tackling information disorder. At the same time, the civil society debate over the activities of FC-DOIs is an essential element of the overall scrutiny in a democratic society aiming at greater openness and transparency of organizations and bodies.

4. Fact-checking and debunking organisations and initiatives

FC-DOIs should broaden their methodological means for approaching fact-checking issues. This includes relying on variety of experts from different fields, and being open for employing novel approaches including computational semantic analysis. The latter even appears to be urgent, considering the limited, imperfect, slow and costly human-based approaches to fact-checking and debunking, and, moreover, the emergence of artificial intelligence techniques for creation and distribution fake news and hoaxes (so called digital factories). In this respect, cooperation with IT companies and the business sector at large proves crucial.

FC-DOIs should increase and adjust their efforts in wider coverage of specific visual (photos) and audio-visual (YouTube) materials.

There is a need for proper sustainability and business plans of the FC-DOIs to be in place.

5. Information Technologies community

The technical community should support the innovation efforts of FC-DOIs and enable them to be up-to-date with their operational and methodological means, but also effective and efficient in their fight against fake news. The support must come through concrete solutions and products adjustable to the context within which FC-DOIs reside.

6. Academic community

The academic community can put efforts in the exploration of the structure, organizational culture and functions of FC-DOIs with the purpose of improving their performance.

Carrying out fast-track, yet complex scientific performance assessment of all EU FC-DOIs based on alternative methodologies (possibly in comparison with other non-EU FC-DOIs) appears to be both desirable and efficient approach to dealing with emergent information disorder issues.

It would be useful to carry out performance assessment of European FC-DOIs based on additional set of criteria/indicators, such as economic indicators (for e.g. cost per output measurement can be at least indicative and potential revealing in this context).

7. The media

The media on a national, European and global level should give larger publicity to the work and achievements of FC-DOIs. The cooperation between the media accountability bodies and the network of FC-DOIs can prove to be a fruitful undertaking in the process of combating fake news and information disorder in general.

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