



TACKLING CORONAVIRUS DISINFORMATION

Getting The Facts Right

#coronavirus #disinformation

10 June 2020

The coronavirus pandemic has been accompanied by a massive wave of false and misleading information, attempts by foreign actors to influence domestic debates in the EU, breeding on the fertile ground of people's most basic anxieties and the rapidly changing news cycle. Misleading healthcare information, dangerous hoaxes with false claims conspiracy theories and consumer fraud endanger public health.

The European Union and its Member States are determined to counter efforts by actors who try to exploit the crisis and put citizens' lives at risk, or who spread propaganda or hatred. Building on the 2018 Action Plan against Disinformation, this calls for more coordinated action, in line with our democratic values.

In a **Joint Communication**, the European Commission and the High Representative propose concrete actions for a stronger and more resilient EU. They will feed into future EU work on disinformation, notably the **European Democracy Action Plan**, as well as the **Digital Services Act**.

The crisis has become a test case showing how the EU and its democratic societies deal with the disinformation challenge. Several aspects are key for a stronger and more resilient EU:

Understand

False or misleading information around coronavirus can damage societal cohesion, but above all, it remains a threat to public health.

False or misleading narratives come in different forms that **require different responses**.

- Content may not be illegal as defined by law, but still harmful.
- It can range from disinformation (defined as intentional) to misinformation.
- It can include misleading healthcare information, consumer fraud, cyber-crime, illegal hate speech as well as targeted influence operations by foreign actors.
- The motivation behind it can range from economic gain (online scams) to deceive and cause public harm.
- Foreign actors and certain third countries, in particular Russia and China, have engaged in targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns in the EU, its neighbourhood, and globally.

The Commission and the High Representative will keep monitoring false or misleading narratives and influence operations by foreign actors.

EXAMPLES OF DISINFORMATION

- False claims such as ‘drinking bleach or pure alcohol can cure the coronavirus infections’: on the contrary, drinking bleach or pure alcohol can be very harmful. **Belgium’s Poison Control Centre has recorded an increase of 15% in the number of bleach-related incidents.**
- Conspiracy theories, such as the claim that coronavirus is ‘an infection caused by the world’s elites for reducing population growth’. The scientific evidence is clear: the virus comes from a family of viruses originating in animals that include other viruses such as SARS and MERS.
- Claims that ‘5G installations would be spreading the virus’. These theories had no specific substantiation and led to attacks on masts.

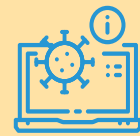


Communicate

Europeans need to have access to verifiable information on coronavirus. The EU shares information from official and other verifiable sources with citizens and cooperates with international partners.

- The Commission and the High Representative will further invest in their strategic communication capabilities.
- The Commission has launched a dedicated **coronavirus response website** that provides **real-time information** on the virus and the EU’s response. A dedicated coronavirus **disinformation section** features **regular rebuttals** – in all EU languages – of the most prominent coronavirus myths.
- The Commission promotes **content** from the **World Health Organization, national health authorities** and the **European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control**.
- The EEAS together with the Commission deployed – and will further strengthen – **strategic communications and public diplomacy in the EU’s immediate neighbourhood and around the world**.
- The Commission **Representations in Member States** will continue to promote fact-based information tailored to the local situation.

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Cooperate

The European Commission is working with its partners across the globe and within the EU.

- **Within the EU** by using established channels such as the **Rapid Alert System**. A special section will be created to facilitate the sharing of coronavirus-related communication materials between EU institutions and Member States. The Commission will further deepen the cooperation with the European Parliament.
- Enhancing cooperation with international partners, including the WHO, the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism, or NATO.
- The EU will also increase support and assistance to civil society actors and independent media in **third countries, including in the neighbourhood**.
- Cooperation with platforms and **Consumer Protection Cooperation network** by screening and taking down overpriced, ineffective or potentially dangerous products.

Transparency

The Commission has closely monitored the actions of **online platforms** under the Code of Practice on Disinformation. There is a need for more efforts, transparency and accountability:

- Signatories of this Code are encouraged to **report monthly** on their actions to fight coronavirus related disinformation and to promote authoritative content.
- Relevant stakeholders that are not yet signatories of the Code are strongly encouraged to participate.
- Building on the work of the newly established European Digital Media Observatory, the EU will further step up its support to **fact-checkers and researchers**. For example, **WeVerify.eu** is used by tens of thousands of journalists worldwide.

RESULTS OF WORKING WITH PLATFORMS

- Since the outbreak of the crisis, Twitter has seen a **45% increase in usage of Twitter Moments** – curated content that allows for global coronavirus tracking, and challenged more than **3.4 million suspicious accounts** targeting coronavirus discussions.
- The Facebook and Instagram Info hubs have directed more than **2 billion people to resources from health authorities**, including the World Health Organisation, through their COVID-19 Information Center.
- Google's YouTube has **reviewed over 100,000 videos** related to dangerous or misleading coronavirus information and has removed over 15,000 of them.
- Microsoft put in place an information panel on LinkedIn and an updated one-stop shop for news related to coronavirus called the Daily Rundown, reaching **96 million people daily**.
- **Platforms** removed millions of misleading advertisements online about overpriced, ineffective or potentially dangerous products.

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Ensuring freedom of expression and pluralistic democratic debate

The EU's approach to fight disinformation is embedded in the respect of fundamental rights. The coronavirus cannot be used as a pretext to undermine freedom of expression, reduce the accountability of public authorities, unduly limit access to information and transparency. The crisis has demonstrated the essential role of journalists, providing citizens with reliable, fact-checked information, contributing to saving lives.

- The Commission has been closely **monitoring the impact of emergency measures taken by Member States** on EU law and values and will continue to do so **until all measures are phased out**.
- The Commission **calls on Member States** to intensify efforts to ensure that **journalists can work safely**, in the right conditions, and **make the most of the EU's coronavirus economic response and recovery package** to support media while respecting their independence.
- The **EU will further enhance support** to civil society, independent media and journalists around the world and step up actions to increase protection of freedom of expression and ensure a safer media environment.

Empowering citizens, raising citizens awareness and increasing societal resilience

The EU needs to empower citizens, raise awareness and increase societal resilience.

- The EU will share best practices on **resilience-building measures** in the coronavirus context.
- The Commission will support and promote **media literacy** projects, critical thinking and digital skills, as well as civil society organisations. It will **strengthen coordination** among institutions, networks and Member States to share awareness-raising material and best practices. The Commission will pay particular attention to **vulnerable groups**, in particular children and young people, who face a higher risk of being misled.