

ROADMAP			
TITLE OF THE INITIATIVE	Fake news and online disinformation		
LEAD DG – RESPONSIBLE UNIT – AP NUMBER	CNECT PLAN/2017/1783	DATE OF ROADMAP	09/11/ 2017
LIKELY TYPE OF INITIATIVE	Communication		
INDICATIVE PLANNING	Q2 2018		
ADDITIONAL INFORMATION	<p>This Roadmap aims to inform stakeholders about the Commission's work in order to allow them to provide feedback and to participate effectively in future consultation activities. Stakeholders are in particular invited to provide views on the Commission's understanding of the problem and possible solutions and to make available any relevant information that they may have. The Roadmap is provided for information purposes only and its content may change. This Roadmap does not prejudge the final decision of the Commission on whether this initiative will be pursued or on its final content.</p>		

A. Context, Problem definition and Subsidiarity Check

Context
<p>Political context</p> <p>Access to reliable information is at the heart of what makes an effective democracy, yet many people find it harder to differentiate factual information and good journalism from propaganda. Increasingly, inaccurate information is shared on social media and echoed by a growing number of news outlets. The spread of fake news through social networks has become a global story due to its claimed impact on the outcome of the 2016 US presidential elections and Brexit. It has also been a source of concern during other recent electoral campaigns in the EU. From a more general perspective, this phenomenon is a proxy for wider issues regarding the commercialisation and private control of the public sphere by social media and the parallel weakening of the traditional news media industry, with adverse effects on the quality of the democratic debate across the EU.</p> <p>Fake news comes in a variety of forms. While some forms of fake news contain illegal content and are thus covered by EU or national law (e.g. false information constituting incitement to hatred or violence, defamation, libel, etc.) there is no existing EU policy aimed at countering fake news and disinformation online when the content is not <i>per se</i> illegal. Fake news can include links on social media sites intended to harvest "clickbait" advertising revenues via third party fake news websites; manipulated or fabricated content around issues of societal importance affecting citizens' lives, such as vaccine scares; false information aimed at undermining the functioning of political institutions or democratic decisions, as well as state-sponsored propaganda intended to influence elections or to reduce trust in democratic processes. As such the spread of disinformation on line has the potential to cause harm to citizens by hindering their possibilities to make informed choices and to harm society by disrupting democratic debate. Fake news does not include journalistic error, partial framing, or the omission of facts, These examples may constitute misinformation, but there is no intention to deceive, the test for disinformation. Satire is beyond the scope of disinformation too.</p> <p>Social platforms are making efforts to help news providers to transition to platform distribution (e.g. Facebook's Journalism Project and News Integrity Project, and Google's Digital News Initiative) and have recently released new services designed to help newsrooms to reach larger audiences (e.g. Facebook's Instant Articles and Trending Topics, Apple News, Google's AMP, Twitter's Moments, Snapchat's Our Story and Discover). They have also started to invest in media literacy initiatives to stimulate critical thinking by their users and in fact-checking.</p> <p>Key political texts on fake news:</p> <p>A European Parliament resolution of 15 June 2017 on online platforms and the digital single market (2016/2276(INI)) calls on the Commission to analyse in depth the current situation and legal framework and to verify the possibility of legislative intervention to limit the dissemination and spreading of fake news content. Additionally, the Mandate letter of Commissioner Gabriel tasks the Commissioner to reflect on possible ways to address the spread of fake information online, and President Juncker's 2017 letter of intent to the EP and the Council signals action on fake information. The Communication on "Online platforms and fake news" is listed in the Commission Work Programme for 2018.</p> <p>Other relevant initiatives</p> <p>The Communication on Online platforms (May 2016), the Code of conduct on countering illegal hate speech (May 2016)</p>

and the [Communication on Tackling Illegal Content Online](#) (September 2017) are addressing the removal of illegal content by online platforms but do not specifically address content that is harmful but not illegal.

The [East Stratcom Task Force](#) was established in 2015 specifically to counteract disinformation and state propaganda aimed at EU from its eastern neighbours. The proposed initiative will link up with the task force's on-going actions.

Problem the initiative aims to tackle

As explained above, fake news comes in a variety of forms. One example is that research on recent election campaigns by the Oxford Internet Institute undertaken on a representative sample of 27 million tweets containing 1M URLs (links) found significant proportions of fake news shared on Twitter: 14% of tweets relating to the German elections contained or linked to fake news, while this proportion rose to 20% of tweets in the context of the UK and French elections.¹

Drivers

- The rapid evolution of news consumption patterns in the EU has led to a situation where social media represent, on average, the main source of news for the younger generations. While only 32% of traffic goes directly to online news publishers' websites, 68% of traffic to online news websites is channelled by third parties platforms. Among these, Facebook and Google have a gatekeeper role by jointly controlling 73% of the referral traffic to news publishers' sites in 2016. As a consequence, social media play an increasing role in shaping journalism. Firstly, social media platforms are increasingly engaging in collaborations with news organisations. Secondly, audience reach and engagement with online news content is primarily determined by the profiling algorithms put in place by the different platforms. The effects of the digital transformation on the news media environment are further strengthened by a dramatic shift of advertising revenues from news publishers to social media: recent studies show that while news publishers' digital revenues rose in Europe by 4 billion EUR between 2010 and 2014, print revenues shrank by 14 billion EUR.
- The shift to social media platforms for news access and consumption means that news providers are increasingly dependent on the latter to distribute their content. However, social media privileges and prioritizes the "hot take," quantity over quality, timeliness over accuracy, which gives space to information without much verification, editing or authentication.² This threatens the role that news providers play as guarantors with responsibility for accurate information and moderators of the debate in our democracies.
- Moreover, social media make it possible for disinformation specialists from third-country to use rich personal data pools to target propaganda to disadvantaged groups within Member States, with the intention of undermining democratic governance across the EU.³ This phenomenon has multiple manifestations depending on the characteristics of the social media platform concerned, including the use of automated bots accounts and sophisticated analytical tools to shape disinformation campaigns.

Subsidiarity check

National initiatives known to the Commission:

The [German law to improve law enforcement in social networks](#) requires platforms to remove content items, including fake news, when they contain illegal content. In Italy, the head of the competition authority has called for an EU-wide approach and the President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies is supporting work on real time Social Media observatory. The [French Senate](#) is considering an Internet Ombudsman type construction, although not limited specifically to the issue of fake news. The UK House of Commons culture, media and sport committee has set up an [inquiry into fake news](#). In addition, the Czech government is setting up a specialist "anti-fake news" unit to counter alleged interference from a third country ahead of their upcoming elections. According to press, the Polish government is working on strong measures that would affect online platforms' responsibilities.

Scope for action at EU level :

Online platforms have a global reach and the effectiveness of national measures may be limited and/or entail a risk of incoherence between policy responses by different Member States and fragmentation within the Single Market. Proliferation of national initiatives addressing fake news could also negatively affect the development of online news and information services across the EU by for instance raising compliance costs for online players, which might reduce the prospects of market entry by new platforms. It is therefore more efficient to address political concerns, in cooperation with the Member States, through a shared approach coordinated at EU level. The proposed Commission Communication will explore ways to maximising the impact of public intervention while respecting the principle of subsidiarity. It will support a multi-stakeholders engagement process, involving platforms, news media, academia and civil society organisations, with a view to identifying solutions consistent with fundamental principles such as freedom of expression and media pluralism, enshrined

¹ <https://youtu.be/wT6R4u5cLJs?t=14m36s>

² M.Littunen, *News, disinformation and Facebook*, Enders Analysis, August 2017, <http://www.endersanalysis.com/content/publication/news-disinformation-and-facebook>

³ See East Stratcom Task Force, http://eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/2015/261115_stratcom-east_qanda_en.htm

in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and applicable coherently across the EU.

B. What does the initiative aim to achieve and how

The initiative aims to establish a coherent and effective approach across the EU to tackling fake news and online disinformation via a Commission Communication while respecting the principle of proportionality. The measures under consideration – explained below – do not necessitate legislative intervention in order to deliver results.

The extensive stakeholder consultation process described below will help the Commission to assess the effectiveness of actions undertaken so far by market players and other stakeholders and to identify where existing activities need to be scaled up or where new actions need to be undertaken in order to address different types of fake news. The Communication aims to offer a set of principles addressed to all the stakeholders concerned, for implementation through self-regulation by social media platforms in cooperation with news providers and civil society.

In particular, the planned multi-stakeholders dialogue should enable the identification of enhanced flagging and content verification systems to ensure a prompt identification of fake news online, including through advanced automatic tools; advanced methods for tracking dissemination patterns of fake news online, removal of fake news originators and disseminators, including impostor websites and social bots; mechanisms to facilitate the exposure of relevant alternative news sources (e.g. traditional media) on users' social feeds; and requirements for more transparency and accountability in the use of algorithms that rank or organise the presentation of online news content. Complementarity and coherence with the Communication on Tackling Illegal Content Online (September 2017) will be ensured.

In this context, longer-term solutions involving dedicated media literacy actions will also be discussed. Increased critical thinking and personal responsibility on the part of users are in fact competences which should be encouraged in order to reduce the sharing of fake news items. There is a large community of media literacy practitioners across the Member States which the Commission have drawn on for work in areas such as radicalisation, education and media policy. The European Parliament has also called on the Commission to engage them further, notably through ["Media literacy for All" pilot projects in 2016, 2017](#) and a preparatory action planned for 2018.

In addition, the planned initiative will also aim at identifying ways to support professional and ethical journalism while respecting editorial independence. Existing actions include:

- [Data journalism initiative within the MEDIA programme](#)
- [Euronews](#)
- H2020 research: [fact-checking and verification](#) projects are already underway. The media section of the 2018 work plan will focus on social media.

C. Better regulation

Consultation strategy

A. Launch of a **public consultation** via an online questionnaire in Q4 2017 to gather the views of a wide range of stakeholders and citizens on fake news. This will be complemented with a **Eurobarometer** public opinion survey to be launched late 2017/early 2018, resulting in a Special Report measuring and analysing the perceptions and concerns of the European citizens around fake news in a more granular way.

B. In a first phase, three parallel meetings with distinct stakeholder groups will be held : (i) an **Expert Conference** involving platforms, news organisations, academia, research and civil society organisations, (ii) a **workshop with Member States** and (iii) an **inter-institutional meeting** involving the EP. In a second phase, a **High Level Expert Group established through an open call for expressions of interest**, will be convened to scope the problem, assess stakeholders positions and measures taken so far, and formulate policy recommendations.

Impact assessment

The Commission is not planning a legislative initiative at this stage.

Evaluations and fitness checks

- A [study on the mechanisms that shape social media and their impact on society](#) will address the functioning of social media and consumers' attitudes to online news.
- A [study on media literacy and online empowerment issues raised by algorithm-driven media services](#) will analyse the issues posed by algorithm-driven media services and the means to empower users to critically approach news accessed online, and identify the necessary transparency requirements for algorithms to enable the development of such a critical approach by users.

The [Media Literacy Expert Group](#) which convenes twice a year will focus to the topic of fake news extensively within 2017-2018 and will be tasked to produce a position paper on media literacy as support to tackling fake news, as input for the Communication.