European Commission: Communication on tackling online disinformation

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On 26 April 2018, the European Commission published the Communication on "Tackling online disinformation: a European approach", setting out the views of the Commission on the challenges associated with disinformation online. It was developed in consideration of consultations with citizens and stakeholders and of the report of the High Level Expert Group published on 12 March 2018 (see IRIS 2018-1/8 and IRIS 2018-5/7). Recognising the threat of online disinformation, particularly on policy making and electoral processes, and the cross-border dimension of online disinformation, the Communication lays out the essential principles and objectives that intend to guide actions to raise public awareness of disinformation and its effective management, together with specific measures that the Commission intends to take to tackle online disinformation.

The Communication firstly lays out the scope, context and main causes of disinformation. Based on the report of the High Level Expert Group, the scope of online disinformation addressed by the Communication is understood as “verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm”. It further emphasises the economic, technological, political and ideological causes of the dissemination of disinformation, such as those stemming from the rise of platforms as the new entrants to the media landscape and their algorithm-based, advertising-driven and technology-enabled functioning, which privileges and rewards viral content and causes a wider dissemination of fake news.

The Communication proposes several measures to be taken by the Commission. These include fostering education and media literacy; the initiation of continuous dialogue to support member states in ensuring the resilience of elections against increasingly complex cyber threats, including online disinformation and cyberattacks; supporting quality journalism as an essential element of a democratic society; and countering internal and external disinformation threats through strategic communication.

In order to ensure a more transparent, trustworthy and accountable online ecosystem, the Commission proposes to hold a multi-stakeholder forum on disinformation. This forum aims to provide a framework for efficient cooperation

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among relevant stakeholders, encompassing online platforms, the advertising industry and major advertisers, and media and civil society representatives, to tackle disinformation. The first expected output of the forum is an EU-wide Code of Practice on Disinformation, to be published by July 2018, with a view to having a measurable impact by October 2018. Its implementation is to be assessed by the Commission in consultation with stakeholders. The Code of Practice of Disinformation has various objectives, some of which are: providing for transparency on sponsored content, especially political advertising online, and on the functioning of algorithms; enabling third party verification; facilitating the discovery of and access to a variety of news sources representing alternative points of view by users; developing tools to identify and close fake accounts and to tackle the issue of automatic bots; and empowering fact-checkers, researchers and public authorities to continuously monitor online disinformation.

As regards fact checking, verifying and assessing the credibility of content in tackling online disinformation, the Communication stresses the role of fact-checking organisations. In this regard, the Commission firstly proposes to support the creation of an independent European network of fact-checkers to set common working methods and to facilitate the exchange of best practices. This network will be invited to participate in the above-mentioned multi-stakeholder forum. Additionally, the Commission suggests launching a secure European online platform on disinformation to support the network with cross-border data collection and analysis, as well as access to EU-wide data, thereby enabling the network to act as trusted flaggers.

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, "Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach, COM(2018) 236 final, 26 April 2018

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