Coronavirus-related disinformation and misinformation, from the spread of dangerous hoaxes and misleading healthcare information, to consumer fraud is detrimental to public health and consumers alike. False claims, such as “it does not help to wash your hands” or “the Coronavirus is only a danger to the elderly” potentially endanger lives.

The European Union and its Member States are determined to counter efforts by actors who attempt to exploit the crisis and put citizens’ lives at risk, or who spread propaganda and hate narratives.

The Commission identifies over 2,700 articles containing Coronavirus-related potential disinformation on a daily basis and online platforms are reporting millions of false or misleading posts, which shows that there is a very large potential for disinformation to flourish.

WHAT THE EU WANTS

- To protect public health and well-being of citizens in the context of the Coronavirus.
- To promote verified information and authoritative content like from the World Health Organisation.
- To counter Coronavirus-related fraud, including price gouging of masks and soaps.
- To improve the accountability and responsibility of online platforms.
- To analyse and expose disinformation, including coordinated campaigns.

THE TOOLS WE HAVE

The EU Action Plan against Disinformation guides the EU response to disinformation. President von der Leyen has called for more action to tackle disinformation under the future European Democracy Action Plan.

- The EU institutions and Member States set up a Rapid Alert System, bringing together warnings, analyses and responses.
- The Code of Practice on Disinformation allows platforms to, on a voluntary basis, fight disinformation by scrutinising ads, deploy transparency measures, delete fake accounts and fight the malicious use of bots.
- The European External Action Service’s EUvsDisinfo project has since 2015 been analysing and exposing disinformation from foreign actors, which have consistently aimed at sowing confusion and undermine trust in our democratic institutions.
- The Commission and the European External Action Service are also in close contact with international partners such as the G7 and NATO to share information and insights.
New actions since the Coronavirus outbreak:

1 Ensuring verified information

- The Commission promotes authoritative content from the World Health Organisation, national health authorities and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.
- The EEAS Strategic Communication Task Forces are monitoring and exposing attempts by foreign state actors to spread disinformation about the Coronavirus.
- The fact-checking and academic communities supported by the EU have stepped up their efforts. For example, WeVerify is widely used by tens of thousands journalists worldwide.

2 Working with social media platforms

The Commission and the European External Action Service have been in contact with all major social media platforms to increase the promotion of authoritative content, to take decisive action on false or misleading content, in particular that could cause serious harm, and take down illegal content. Platforms are stepping up their response:

- 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.
- The Facebook and Instagram Info hubs have directed more than 2 billion people to resources from health authorities, including the World Health Organisation.
- YouTube has reviewed over 100,000 videos related to dangerous or misleading Coronavirus information and has removed over 15,000 of them.

The Commission urged companies to share relevant data with the research and fact-checking community, as well as to work together with authorities in all Member States. Contacts will continue to ensure platforms further improve their response.

3 Debunking myths

To counter harmful or misleading content, the Commission has launched a special page on fighting disinformation1 around the Coronavirus outbreak. The page includes specific rebuttals on the most recurrent, harmful and widely spread myths around the crisis. This page is available in all official EU languages and is updated frequently.

- Examples include claims that drinking bleach or alcohol can cure Coronavirus infections. On the contrary, drinking bleach or alcohol can instead be very harmful.
- Stories regarding migrants intentionally spreading the virus are also circulating. To help fight racism and discrimination in the context of the outbreak, the origin and spread of the virus are recalled, highlighting that neither migrants nor any specific social or ethnic group is to blame for bringing the Coronavirus to Europe.
- Claims that the Coronavirus is a biological weapon created artificially sow suspicion and division amongst people and countries at a moment where all efforts should be pulled together to fight the pandemic.

Disinformation also comes in the form of exploiting consumers - deceptive marketing techniques abuse fears in order to sell products, falsely claiming that they can prevent or cure Coronavirus infections. Certain traders are also luring consumers into buying products at exorbitant prices. The Commission is working with Member States to tackle such scams and unfair business practices. The Commission also invited Allegro, Amazon, AliExpress, Bing, CDiscount, Ebay, Facebook, Google, Rakuten, Wish and Yahoo to cooperate with consumer authorities and take proactive measures to counter Coronavirus-related scams, including price gouging.

Within less than a week action had been taken by these platforms:

- Increasing their effort to detect products which are subject to potential scams, including through automated means;
- Proactively taking down misleading ads and ‘miracle products’ with unsupported health claims;
- Taking measures to stop online scams promoting fake products against the virus (face masks, gloves, sanitizers);
- Use of algorithms to detect excessive prices;
- Delisting those traders who ignore platforms’ requests to amend their offers.

Where necessary, platforms cooperate with police to track down rogue traders. In the last weeks, millions of products were removed that made unsupported claims about the Coronavirus.

The Commission and the European External Action Service are in close contact with Member States’ authorities as well as with international partners such as the G7 and NATO to share information and insights.

The Rapid Alert System allows for close cooperation to detect and assess disinformation campaigns from external sources and to coordinate strategic communications efforts among EU institutions and Member States.

Valuable experience has also been gained through coordination with Member States’ authorities at national and European level, including through dedicated cooperation networks.

The European External Action Service works on proactive communication on risks linked to disinformation and cooperates with partners in the EU’s neighbourhood.

CHECK YOUR FACTS!

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the Coronavirus outbreak has been accompanied by a massive “infodemic”, which the WHO describes as an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – rendering it difficult to find trustworthy information sources and reliable guidance.