

# Synopsis report of the public consultation on fake news and online disinformation

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## Executive summary

The consultation aimed to assess the scope of the problem, the effectiveness of current actions and the need for new ones on the basis of two questionnaires: one for citizens and another for organisations and journalists.

Over 97% of citizens claim to have been exposed to fake news: 38% on a daily basis; 32% on a weekly basis. 74% consider social media and messaging apps as the primary channels through which they come across fake news.

There is a perception amongst respondents that fake news is highly likely to cause harm to society, in particular in political affairs, immigration, minorities and security.

Fact-checking through independent news and civil society organisations is considered the method that better contributes to counter the spread of disinformation online. However, 70% of citizens believe that social media platforms are not doing enough to help users fact-check information before it is shared online.

With regard to future actions, 84% of organisations agreed that more should be done to reduce the spread of disinformation online. Regardless of the action, respondents unanimously agreed on the need to respect and guarantee fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and ensure that tackling fake news does not promote direct or indirect censorship.

Respondents clearly preferred a multi-stakeholder, multi-dimensional, self-regulatory approach. Some complained about the lack of a level playing field between content producers and online social platforms, and suggested regulatory changes. Many of the proposed principles and actions to tackle fake news focus on the role of online social platforms.

There was support to fact-checking as a way to combat fake news, albeit its efficiency is limited and it should be accompanied by other measures. Respondents suggest possible tools to empower journalists and end-users, including artificial intelligence and block chain. As in fact-checking, each tool's efficiency largely depends on who uses it and for which purposes.

Increasing the media literacy of pupils, adults, end-users and journalists, and ensuring support to and access of the public to trusted journalism, were put forward as necessary actions.

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## **I. Introduction**

The public consultation on fake news and online disinformation took place between 13 November 2017 and 23 February 2018.

The consultation collected views on fake news across the EU covering scope of the problem and the effectiveness of voluntary industry measures already in place to prevent the spread of online disinformation. The objective was to better understand the rationale and possible directions for action at EU and/or national level.

This synopsis report provides a detailed analysis of the substance of the contributions, and complements the [summary report](#) of 12 March 2018.

Two questionnaires targeted citizens on the one hand, and organisations and journalists on the other. Some questions were specific to each questionnaire and collected views either from citizens or from organisations and journalists only; others were used in both questionnaires.

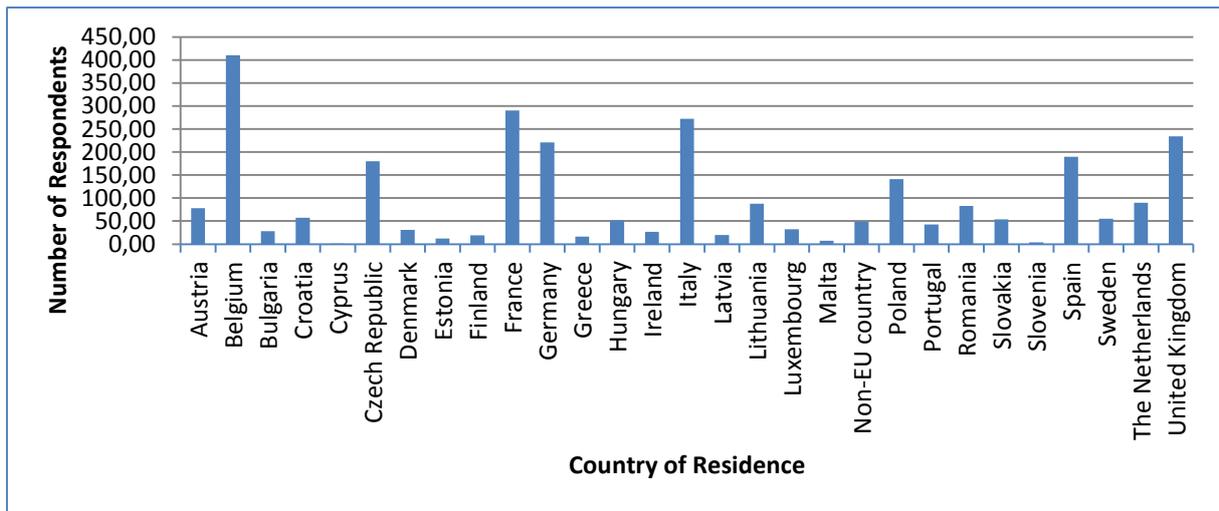
This analysis does not represent the official position of the Commission and its services, and does not bind the Commission in any way.

Together with Eurobarometer results and the report of the High Level Group, the public consultation has informed the Commission Communication on fake news and online disinformation adopted on 26th April 2018.

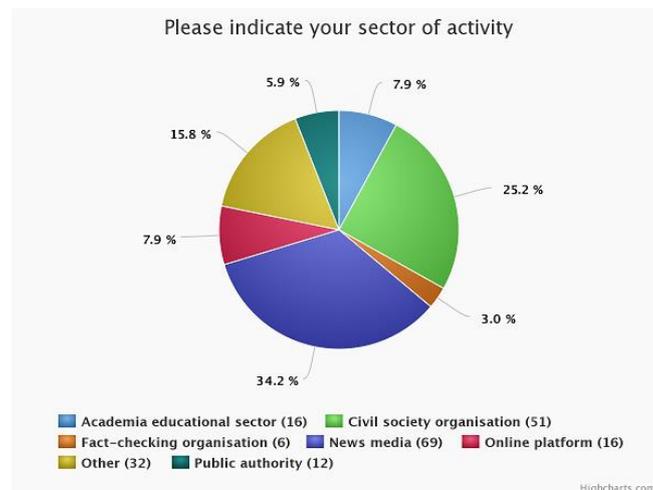
## **II. Overview of respondents**

The public consultation received 2986 replies: 2784 from individuals and 202 from legal organisations and journalists. The largest number of replies came from Belgium, France, the United Kingdom, Italy and Spain. It is worth noting a high participation in Lithuania, Slovakia and Romania.

Particular attention should be given to the participation of France, United Kingdom, Italy and Spain due to the specific political context of recent election and referendum campaigns, and the influence fake news may have had during these processes.



As regards replies from organisations, the largest proportion of respondents represented private news media companies, followed by civil society organisations, other type of organisations, online platforms, research and academia and public authorities (national and local). Many respondents are active around the world or in a large number of EU countries, including Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, Germany and the UK. Sixty-nine news media organisations, 51 civil society organisations and 16 online platforms replied.



### III. Scope of the problem

#### 1- Citizens' use of information channels and topics followed

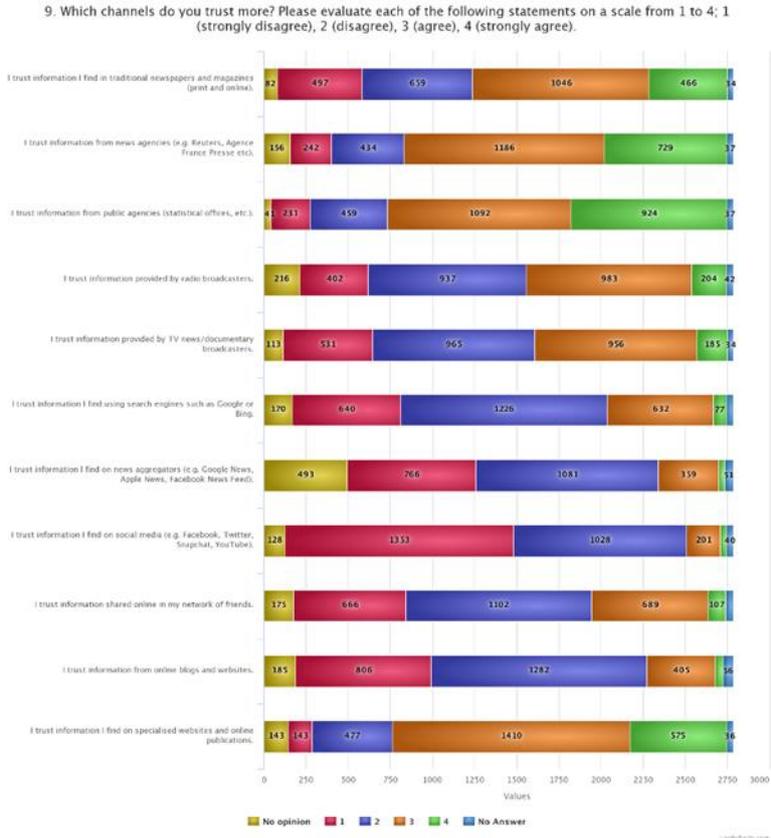
The information channels used slightly vary according to the age of the respondents. Citizens above 50 use less social media for news (59%) than younger generations (72%) and use more TV (59%) and radio (52%) against 30% and 30% respectively for people under 50. Over 40% claim that they never or rarely use traditional print newspapers and magazines as information channel, which contrasts with the daily use from respondents in terms of traditional online newspapers and news magazines (62%) and the social media and messaging apps (70%).

On average, 47% of people above 50 read traditional press on a daily or weekly basis. This result drops to 35% for people aged 35-50, to 29% for people below 25 and to 23% for the 25-35 age group. News aggregators and news agencies follow similar trends as 46% of the respondents affirm that to rarely or never follow information channels like Google News, Apple news, Yahoo news.

Social media and other types of online news distribution channels are widely used by all age groups: 88% weekly use of social media for people under 25, 85% for people 25-35 and 35-50, and 70% for people over 50. Domestic policies and international affairs are the most read news topics (80% of respondents), followed by science and technology, economics and finance.

**2- Citizens’ trust in information channels**

The above results are likely to explain the different levels of trust of respondents in the various sources of information: least trusted are social media, online news aggregators, online blogs and websites. By contrast, the most trusted are public agencies and specialised websites and online publications (both 72%), news agencies (69%) and traditional newspapers and magazines (55%). These results also correlate to the way respondents discern fake news from correct information: by comparing different sources of information (90%), searching the source of information (80%), relying on brand reputation (62%) or journalist reputation (57%), by confronting impressions with friends and peers (62%), checking what other people say online (57%) or consulting a fact-checking website (54%).



### 3- Criteria to define fake news

Organisations and journalists were asked to suggest several criteria to define fake news. Responses highlighted a wide range of criteria, with consensus that fake news could be defined by looking at: 1) intent, the apparent objectives pursued by fake news; 2) the sources of such news and 3) the actual content of the news.

Respondents propose a definition of fake news based on the pursued objectives of the news. The concept would mainly cover the online news, although sometimes disseminated in traditional media too, intentionally created and distributed to mislead the readers and influence their thoughts and behaviour. Fake news would seek to polarise public opinion, opinion leaders and media by creating doubts about verifiable facts, eventually jeopardising the free and democratic opinion-forming process and undermining trust in democratic processes. Gaining political or other kind of influence, or money through online advertising (clickbait), or causing damage to an entity or a person can also be the main purpose of fake news. The existence of a clear intention behind the fake news would set the difference with misinformation i.e. where wrong information is provided owing for instance to good-faith mistakes or to non-respecting basic journalism standards (verification of sources, investigation of facts, etc.).

The nature of the sources and the volume of false information attributable to each source could also be a way to identify fake news. News based on anonymous sources or just on a single, non-contrasted source with no or little information on the context along with a lack of alternative arguments, would qualify as fake and breach of journalism standards. There were divergent views on the nature of the source. Some respondents said that if the source is a state institution the probability that the information is true would be higher than if the source was a private body. For others, it was the opposite as they thought that governments are often the source of false and distorted news.

It was also suggested that fake news refer to any content (text, images, video) of propagandistic character or focusing exclusively on alarmist news, based on emotions or inciting to hatred and xenophobia —although this would qualify as illegal content.

Fake news would also refer, in a narrow sense, to any kind of false information not supported by statistics, containing lies, untrue or manipulated facts or purposefully incorrect interpretation of events, usually in the form of viral news —even when its content has been debunked— and buzzwords, with an often hidden political interest or against the scientific consensus in the case of health-related news.

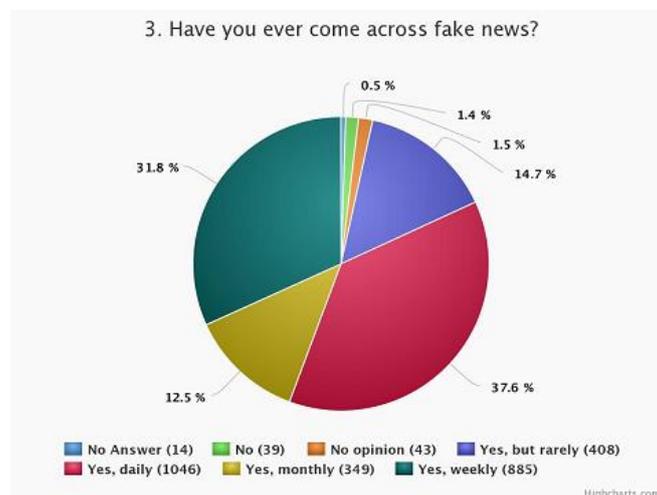
Fake news is often presented in a professional look to deceive more people. From that perspective, it could be defined as “verifiably false news” that can be proven or rebutted. In most cases, it was clear to respondents that the term “fake news” is not about illegal content as defined by EU or national laws, nor is it satire or parody which should be defended on grounds of freedom of expression and information and for which legislation exists.

The need was stressed to distinguish between information and opinion and/or propaganda in this debate.

Civil society organisations and news media in particular criticised the term "fake news" as misleading and with negative connotations i.e. used by those who criticise the work of media or opposing political views. A definition is necessary. Fake news would be a symptom of a wider problem —information disorder<sup>1</sup>—and the use of "disinformation" was suggested as a more appropriate expression. In that sense, there was a call for multidisciplinary research to understand the phenomenon and its actual impact, and ensure that the response is necessary, targeted and proportionate.

#### 4- Fake news frequency

Over 97% of respondents to the citizens consultation claim to have been exposed to fake news, 38% of them on a daily basis and 32% on a weekly basis<sup>2</sup>.



#### 5- Media for circulation of fake news

A majority of respondents to both questionnaires taken together consider social media and messaging apps as the primary channels through which they come across fake news. Online blogs and forums are mentioned second, although at varying levels (45% citizens and 72% organisations). Media such as online-only newspapers and video-sharing platforms follow, along with the sharing of information by friends or family. News agencies and radio appear at the other extreme of the scale with the lowest number of responses.

<sup>1</sup> Several respondents said this term was coined in a report commissioned by the Council of Europe, "Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making", DGI(2017)09.

<sup>2</sup> These figures mirror the results of the [Flash Eurobarometer](#) on the same subject

| In which media do you most commonly come across fake news? |  |
|--|--|
| Citizens   | Organisations and journalists                        |
| Social media and messaging apps – 74%                      | Social media and messaging apps – 78%                |
| Online blogs/forums 45%                                    | Online blogs/forums 73%                              |
| Online only newspapers 39%                                 | Video sharing platforms 52%                          |
| Information shared by friends or family 36%                | Information shared by friends or family 44%          |
| Video sharing platforms 34%                                | Online only newspapers 37%                           |
| TV 34%   | News aggregators 26%                                 |
| Traditional online newspapers and news magazines 33%       | TV 22%   |
| Traditional print newspapers and news magazines 25%        | Traditional online newspapers and news magazines 20% |
| News aggregators 14%                                       | Traditional print newspapers and news magazines 16%  |
| Radio 14%  | Radio 12%  |
| News agencies 9%   | No opinion 10%                                       |
| No opinion 2%  | News agencies 9%                                     |
| No answer 0.4%   | No answer 6%   |

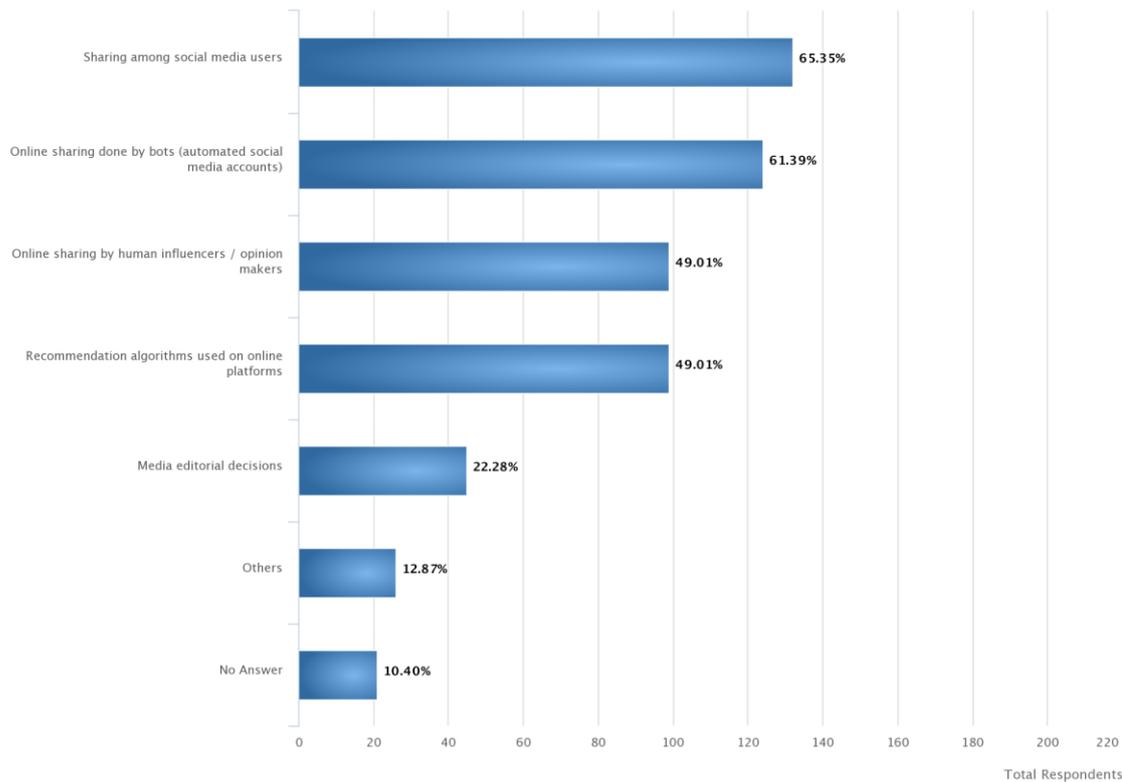
### 6- Dissemination mechanisms with the highest impact<sup>3</sup>

In line with the above results, two thirds of organisations and journalists think that the dissemination mechanisms with the highest impact on the spread of fake news are the sharing of fake news among social media users and by automated social accounts. Almost half of organisations and journalists also think that human influencers and algorithms used on online platforms are other mechanisms to spread fake news. Compared to these figures, only 22% of respondents think that media editorial decisions are behind the dissemination of fake news.

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<sup>3</sup> Question for organisations and journalists only

6. Indicate which of the following dissemination mechanisms, in your opinion, have the highest impact on the spread of fake news in the EU? Select the most relevant options.



## 7- Causes of fake news spread via online media

The perception of the respondents to the citizens' questionnaire is that the spread of fake news via social media is made easy because fake news appeal to readers' emotions (88%), are disseminated to orient the public debate (84%) and are conceived to generate revenues (65%). Moreover, respondents believe that news are shared without prior check (85%) or are not verified (80%) before being published.

When asked about other reasons, the most recurrent one was lack of knowledge i.e. media literacy and the need for education and critical thinking. In most cases, respondents relate the need for more education and information with the fact that news is shared without being verified or read before.

In addition, respondents argue that information produced by traditional media channels using online platforms should also be confirmed. Many answers imply distrust towards online media channels.

Answers for this open question include politically motivated discourses and strategies aiming to influence and change national or regional policies by swaying public opinion, particularly elections and immigration policies. Some respondents believe that international interference including by state actors is also cause for the online spread of fake news. The prospect of economic gain through “click-bait” content is also frequently mentioned.

There is also the perception that fake news is conceived and spread easily because there is no legal responsibility. In other words, the use of online platforms creates a gap in accountability and responsibility, making it easy to create and share fake information without consequence.

Another factor is the speed at which a numerous users can share information online, as well as its low costs compared with traditional media. In this connection, some mentioned the use of automated bots.

### **8- Main drivers that contribute to the spread of fake news<sup>4</sup>**

Most organisations and journalists see several intertwined factors behind the rapid spread of disinformation with shared responsibilities between stakeholders. Some civil society organisations noted that both the spread and the impact of disinformation are smaller than generally assumed and that more studies are needed to properly understand the phenomenon.

Digitisation of the media industry and the speed, ease and low cost at which news can be produced —often anonymously — transmitted, consumed and re-transmitted by consumers and the media is mentioned as an important factor. Technology has positive effects in connecting with new audiences and enabling access to new sources of information and different points of view. Yet, technology has also made possible online material that appears professional and credible to the reader, requiring low production costs and skills compared to those of traditional publishing in order to produce quality information. This includes websites that misrepresent their identity to trick users into believing they are legitimate sources of information. Digitisation has also had a disintermediation effect, whereby sources (like journalists, politicians and advertisers) can bypass news media and communicate directly with their audience, with obvious implications on the role and “visibility” of press publishers and news media.

The increasing number of consumers that access the news through social media as their primary and free source of information was mentioned too. Social networks make the retransmission of fake news easy, instant and cheap, without the intervention of conventional accountable gatekeepers and thus without following any particular editorial line or standards, other than maximising time spent on the platform itself. This is compounded by the fact that more and more users especially younger ones, access information through their mobile device quickly, without critical reflection on the content – as one respondent puts it, *Millennials ‘snack’ on small but frequent bits of news throughout the day* – and willingness to pay for quality journalism. Newsfeeds in social media would create a mixture of established media news and "alternate" media, making it difficult for the reader to discern between the two. For some news organisations, social networks reinforce the eco-chamber effect as the close circle of friends or relations quite often replace the traditional editor as the trusted source.

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<sup>4</sup> Question for organisations and journalists only

News and civil society organisations stressed that trust would thus no longer derive from the source of the story e.g. a reputable newspaper, but from an information filtering system controlled by closed corporate algorithms and indicators intrinsic to the online platforms, such as the number of shares/retweets or recommendations from social-media friends.

For academics, news organisations and other respondents, the fact that more and more consumers access information through social media puts pressure on traditional media, which competes with social networks and other media outlets on a lasting basis with news disseminated quickly on a 24-hours basis. This leaves no time for fact verification or in-depth and investigative research by journalists, making it difficult for readers to form an opinion. The pressure to be first brings about a drop in quality and makes the job more precarious with growing numbers of freelance journalists. Eventually, traditional media end up by copying or quoting existing news and data without checking them for their credibility or authenticity, thus contributing to the spread of fake news in mainstream media.

Another driver would be the Internet advertising model whose first objective is to promote traffic using algorithms in order to grow advertising revenue. Online advertising is often done without transparency and appropriate checks and controls, regardless of whether the displayed content is true or false. It is a model where quantity prevails over quality and where revenues would have turned disinformation into hard currency. This has resulted in deepening the financial crisis of mainstream media, leading to falling advertising revenues, circulation and subscriptions - the basis of the traditional funding model. The advertising industry cautioned however, that advertising or sponsored content does not represent the same issue as fake news: advertisements rules and standards cover 97% of all advertisement seen in the EU and generating advertising revenues should not be *per se* a defining criterion for fake news.

News organisations say that the above factors create a lack of level playing field between traditional media and online platforms. Traditional media are subject to strict rules on editorial responsibility and transparency, having to apply customer due diligence, while intermediaries and aggregators in the online media market generally do not accept liability for the content they curate and authors or sponsors can be impossible or difficult to identify, leaving consumers with lower levels of protection.

Low media literacy is another driver particularly raised by civil society organisations that say that Internet content is generally considered authoritative, irrespective of who wrote it. Although most citizens consider themselves digitally literate enough to identify false reports, many do not have sufficient critical skills to discriminate between trustworthy and fake information.

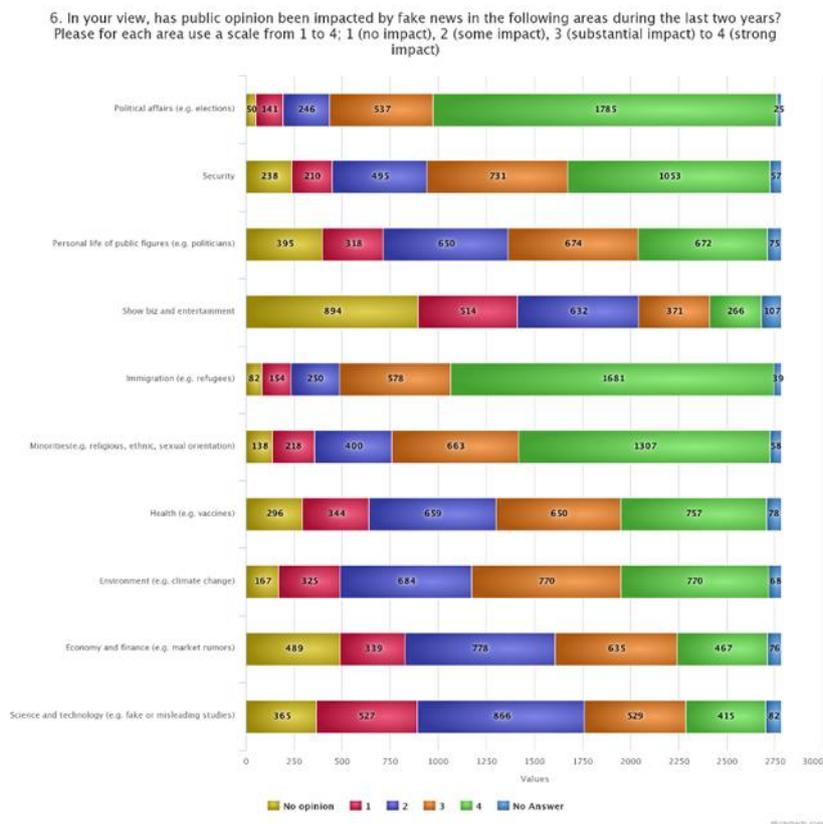
Another reason would be the general socio-economic situation with growing poverty and inequality and an increasingly polarised political discourse e.g. around immigration, EU membership, terrorism. Some claim that even political organisations have accepted the use of misleading information to favour compliant media and disadvantage critical voices, undermining democratic values.

## 9- Areas targeted by fake news

Regarding the areas mostly influenced by fake news, contributions received to both questionnaires point at political affairs (73% citizens' responses), immigration (67%), minorities (52%) and security (42%). Answers affirm that most harm is done on voting decisions (73%) and influencing immigration policies (68%), undermining trust in public institutions (54%), followed by influencing environmental (53%) and health policies (51%), economy or finance (43%) and public security (43%).

## 10- Impact of fake news on public opinion

Citizens' replies show that half of them consider public opinion as heavily impacted by fake news. According to the results, fake news on political affairs (64%), on immigration issues (60%) and minorities (47%) impacted public opinion over the last two years. Replies by organisations and journalists point to the same categories.

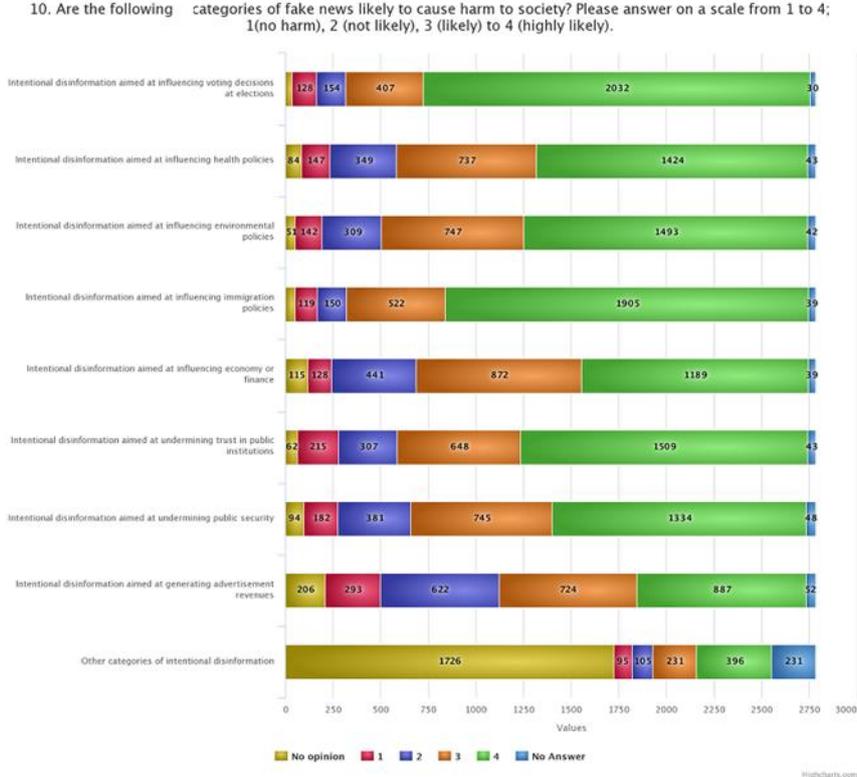


## 11- Impact of fake news on society

Respondents to both questionnaires consider that fake news in general is highly likely to cause harm to society, namely intentional disinformation aimed at influencing voting decisions and immigration policies.

Answers demonstrate concern about the influence of fake news on society. Respondents claim intentional disinformation aimed at undermining trust in public institutions and at influencing environmental or health policies, at undermining public security, at generating

advertisement revenues or aimed at influencing economy or finance are highly likely to cause harm to society.

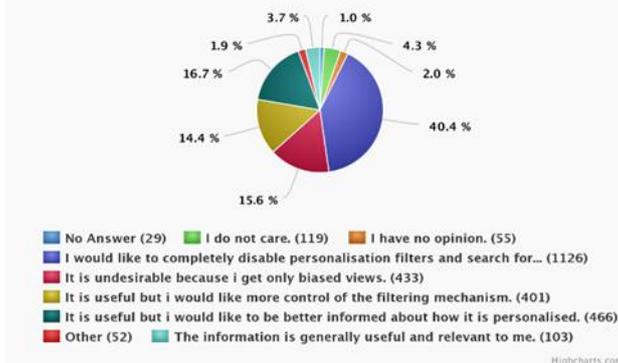


Among other categories of fake news also likely to cause harm to society, respondents identified disinformation aimed at misleading readers on international affairs and policies concerning the EU institutions. Respondents also added fake news on ethnic, civil rights, gender or religious issues, on social inclusion of specific or minority groups, aiming at creating polarisation in society. News about the interpretation of technological and scientific facts, with several comments on diet plans and vaccination policies is another category. Other respondents suggested news that aims to destroy reputation and undermining trust in established media. News on citizens, businesses, and consumers including results of consumer surveys could be another category. "Fake images" that may be used as evidence of past or ongoing fake news were also suggested.

**12- Personalisation of information**

Over 40% of the respondents to the citizens' questionnaire stated that they would like to completely disable personalisation filters and search independently for information. 16% stated that personalisation of information is undesirable as users receive only biased views. 15% of respondents affirmed that personalisation of information is useful, but they would like to more control over the filtering mechanism. Finally, 4% of the respondents indicated the personalisation of information as useful and relevant to them.

11. What do you think about the fact that the information that is displayed to you online is often personalised? Select one option.



There is a common understanding amongst citizens that personalised online information categorizes users. The information each user accesses is inevitably different, limiting access to it and promoting biased information. This may be a problem when the information relates to sensitive political issues. There is thus a need to balance usefulness and the need to personalise information with neutrality, transparency and privacy. Although some answers indicated that the personalisation of information is useful only for consumer purposes, responses affirm the importance of granting users more control over filtering mechanisms. As referred by the respondents, it is unethical to collect, store and use private data as “one’s browsing habits should not be monitored”.

### 13- Criteria used by online platforms and news organisations to rank news content

Content and the credibility of the sources are the two main criteria that news organisations and online platforms use to rank news content.

Broadcasters and media outlets select the most important news items by looking into how relevant content is to their audience – timeliness, trends, importance in a country or region, with the objective of sustaining informed citizenship and contributing to the public debate.

Reputation, credibility and established reliability of the sources of information is the second criterion news media use.

In applying these criteria, most news organisations refer to the use of professional journalistic standards and codes of conduct so as to publish information only when it has been checked and confirmed.

Google explained that a series of algorithms behind the ranking systems analyse hundreds of different factors from freshness of the content, number of times the search terms appear and whether the page has a good user experience. Trustworthiness is assessed by looking for sites that many users seem to value for similar queries. The fact that other prominent websites link to the page is another relevant criteria to give visibility to content. Algorithms can identify spam and remove sites that violate Google’s webmaster guidelines from their

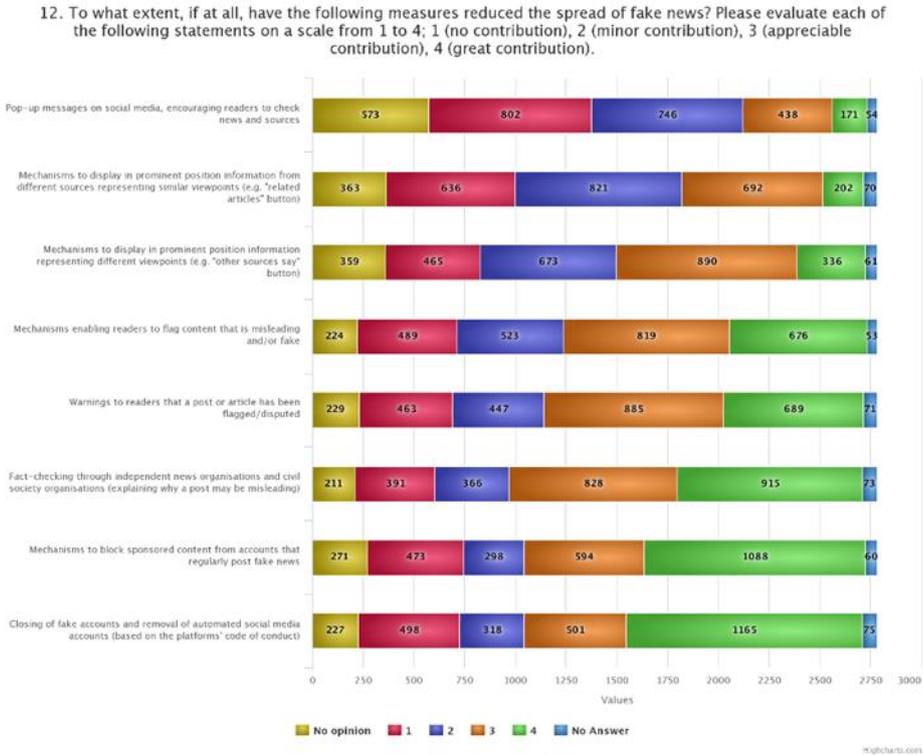
results. In the case of Google News, articles are selected and ranked by computers that evaluate, among other things, how often and on what sites a story appears online.

**IV. Measures to reduce fake news**

**14- Efficiency of measures to reduce fake news**

Almost 63% of citizens and 54% of organisations perceive fact-checking through independent news organisations and civil society organisations as the method that better contributes to counter the spread of disinformation online, making a great or appreciable contribution. 60% of citizens and 50% of organisations also think that the closing of fake accounts and the removal of automated social media accounts based on the platforms' code of conduct and mechanisms to block sponsored content from accounts that regularly post fake news also help reduce the spread of fake news. Warnings to readers that a post or article has been flagged /disputed or mechanisms enabling readers to flag content that is misleading and/or fake are also positively seen by around four in ten respondents in the case of organisations and 56% of citizens.

Pop-up messages on social media (22% of citizens and 19% of organisations), mechanisms to display information from different sources presenting similar positions (32% -24%) and the display of information representing different viewpoints (44% - 30%) were seen as less efficient.



Respondents provided many arguments about the perceived low level of efficiency of some suggested measures.

Pop-up messages are perceived as the less effective tool because readers often ignore them. They require an extra effort by the reader in a context of passive media consumption with little attention and superficial reading of the content –often just the title and headlines, with no time for extra messages. They may even have provoke adverse reactions i.e. pop-ups could be seen as a way to limit freedom of speech and frustrate readers. There is also a widely spread idea that users easily block, ignore or avoid pop-ups, some also affirm that they have never seen any pop-ups, browsers may block them and, finally, pop-ups can rely on algorithms with specific interests or depend on people’s opinion and willingness.

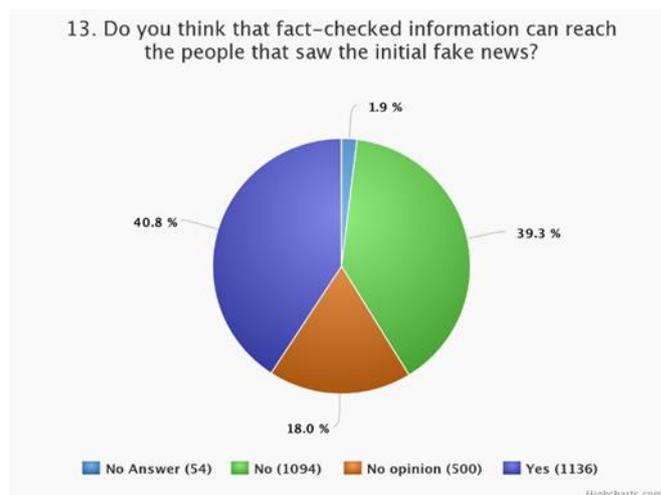
On mechanisms to display information from different sources presenting similar positions, the general view was that this could result in strengthening the echo-chamber effect. The “related articles” tool could thus do little to expand the perspectives at the disposal of audiences and would only increase exposure to fake news. It was suggested that “related articles” should be promoted only if they include trusted sources.

Regardless of whether tools are used to display similar or opposite viewpoints, it was pointed out that they could also spread disinformation. For example, placing fake news posts alongside quality, accurate news may also have the effect of leading the reader to question the reliable, accurate news source.

Mechanisms enabling readers to flag content could be a double-edged sword that could help identify misleading content and have the opposite effect as this tool is open to abuse i.e. anyone can flag anything. One example would be that of an interest group making true news into fake by flagging some information as not true in a coordinated manner. Another suggested effect is that readers could infer that non-flagged content could always be considered true. As with the previous information systems, flags can be helpful or harmful, depending on whether the (original) information is true or false. The bubble effect would also prompt users to flag content that does not reflect their viewpoint, irrespective of whether it is fake or misleading.

While fact-checking was the preferred method to counter the spread of disinformation online, some issues around it were mentioned. One is the limited impact it may have on readers' beliefs and misconceptions. Fact-checking is based on facts, while beliefs and emotions would have a stronger influence in the audience. Some fact-checking initiatives could be unsuccessful in dismantling false news due to their very technical nature.

When asked whether fact-checked information can reach the people that saw the initial news, 41% of citizens answered positively, whilst 39% believe that *post factum* fact-checking will not reach the intended audience. Respondents in the first group believe that fact-checking relies on people willingness and commitment, stressing however, the need for an efficient and high visible fact-checking system. Those with a negative view think that often the first information presented to the reader or the public sphere will persist, even when new information is provided, and therefore the damage caused by fake news will remain even after fact checking the information.



Other possible issues on fact-checking refer to the sustainability of these tools – who would pay for independent fact checkers – and the potential risk of empowering private actors to assess what can be posted or not online.

Some doubts were expressed about the closing of fake and automated social media accounts. Although possibly effective, this tool may produce mistakes and does not prevent new accounts opening.

### 15- Measures taken by online platforms and news organisations

The unanimous message by news media organisations is that the most effective measure to counter the spread of disinformation is giving the public access to quality, trusted journalism. Almost all news media referred to their adherence to internal guidelines and codes of conducts, as well as to professional journalism standards and self-regulation. This means using information from trusted sources only, and checking the veracity of the information impartially and independently before publishing or broadcasting it. In practice, this entails disregarding stories that come from unreliable sources or where there are doubts about the trustworthiness of the source.

Linked to the above some respondents focused on transparency measures about distribution channels. These efforts can lead to the creation of databases of the most important false news distribution networks, as well as to the identification of fake accounts in networks.

Many news media organisations also stressed the strengthening of fact-checking as part of their business, acknowledging that this requires time and resources. They also use peer reviews and flagging by trusted flaggers. Several broadcasters have set up specialised teams to debunk fake news, counter targeted false information and verify the authenticity of user-generated content before it is used as a source for news. WAN-IFRA and AFP mentioned the "INVID" plug-in to debunk fake videos and pictures currently funded by the EU Horizon 2020 R&D programme.

Companies have also engaged in training journalists on fact-checking, in particular in checking online information, including the development of professional codes of practice to deal with information from social networks.

Several public service broadcasters underlined how making trusted quality information available on all technological platforms, including social networks, is also a very efficient method to combat disinformation and quote results from public opinion surveys showing that public broadcasters have the highest level of trust by citizens.

Broadcasters and other media organisations support activities to increasing media literacy, contribute to schools for journalists and promote actions in schools and to younger audiences to raise awareness among students on the risks of fake news<sup>5</sup>.

The independent advertising standards bodies referred to the use of self-regulation and ethical standards in commercial communications, ensuring that advertising is legal, decent, honest and truthful. This self-regulatory system covers 97% of all advertisements seen by the EU population.

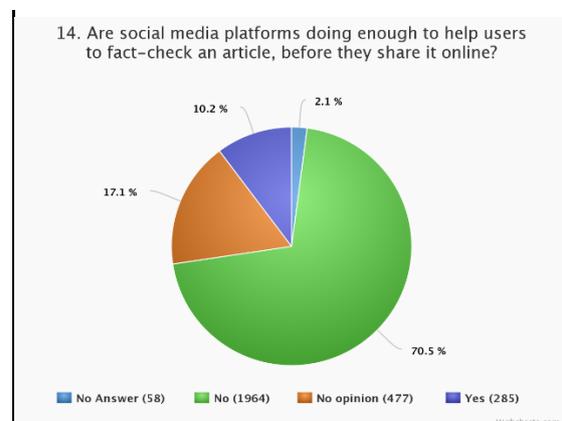
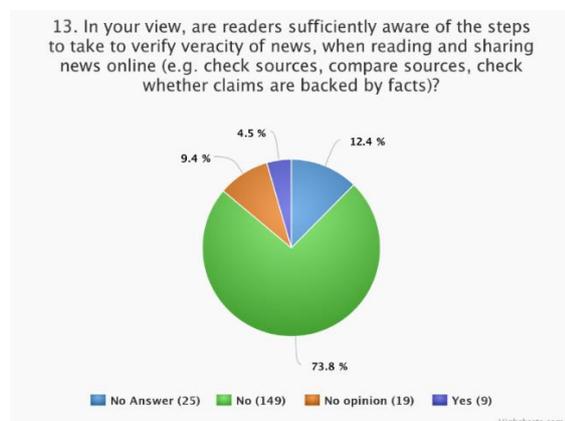
There was little information on the actual results of the above measures online platforms, media and web sites had adopted.

### 16- Readers' awareness of the steps to verify the veracity of news

A large majority (74%) of organisations and journalists think readers are not sufficiently aware of how to check the veracity of news when reading and sharing news online e.g. check and compare sources, whether claims are backed by facts. That points to the need to increase media literacy levels. Only 5% responded positively to this question.

In contrast, 70% of citizens believe that social media platforms are not doing enough to help users fact-check articles before they are shared.

Citizens' views on the role of social network platforms are mixed between those who think social media platforms do not have the legitimacy to decide whether an information is fake or not, as it might breach the right to freedom of speech, and those who believe that social media platforms should do more to present alternative information, check other sources, watchdog accounts and flag news with fake content. This argument came along with the idea that social media platforms are responsible for the content they make available.



<sup>5</sup> ZDF: Schluss mit lustig! Wie erkennst du fake news', 'Tipps zum sicheren surfen'

Almost all organisations and journalists agree that low media literacy in particular of younger audiences but also of adults, is the biggest problem regarding readers' awareness and critical thinking when reading and sharing news online. There is a general call to strengthen media literacy, raise awareness of the issue and better understand the danger of fake news, as well as to include media literacy programmes in schools so that young readers learn a critical, enlightened approach towards information spread in social media.

Media literacy should also help foster the ability to check the veracity of news or online posts and distinguish information from disinformation. Different research results were quoted about the lack of skills or competence to read and interpret complex texts, and to understand not just the difference between true and fake stories but also the difference between reporting, sponsored opinion pieces and advertising<sup>6</sup>.

While calling for stronger media literacy, many news media suggested that the audience should be more proactive and critical when accessing online news, meaning that it should trust professional brands only, know the information source and possible conflicts of interest or be sceptical of dubious content. Other recommendations include checking the information sources, looking for alternative sources, identifying the media owners, checking whether the images or texts have been published before on the internet and establish their origin.

Google however, quoted research showing that consumers use Search to check facts that they have heard or seen in other media. Internet users consult an average of 4.5 different media and encounter diverse information across multiple media often intentionally, that challenges their viewpoints. This is useful in discerning online information. "Die medienanstalten" – the umbrella brand of the 14 state media authorities in Germany - referred to research showing that the competence for source criticism varies in particular according to age. Almost one person in two claims to check the facts in the message (45 %). To identify alleged fake news, 14-24 year olds more often than not check the facts, the author or the source link.

### **17- How do online platforms and news organisations help readers to read and share news online**

Online platforms and news organisation were asked about the actions they take to help readers. Strengthening media literacy appears to be the best way to inform readers when reading and sharing news online. News organisations, including broadcasters and some platforms, actively participate in school programmes to raise awareness amongst pupils of disinformation and encourage a critical approach.

Respondents gave examples of websites, blogs, articles and broadcast programs that raise awareness of the precautions viewers should take when reading and sharing news online. Some information outlets regularly post information about disinformation content, fake

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<sup>6</sup> Guardian Media Group referred to Research by Ofcom showing that 28% of 8-11s and 27% of 12-15s assume that if Google lists a website then they can trust it and that 51% can't identify sponsored links on Google as advertising.

news and the media's response or compare the editorial policy of traditional media with disinformation outlets. Some actions specifically target children to help them develop understanding and skills to discern quality information.

Media organisations claim that the best way to tackle disinformation is through quality news based on independent investigative journalism.

Besides media literacy, providers of online news declared that linking their stories to the original sources, documents or reports and facilitating access to additional sources of information was a very effective way to help readers assess the quality of news.

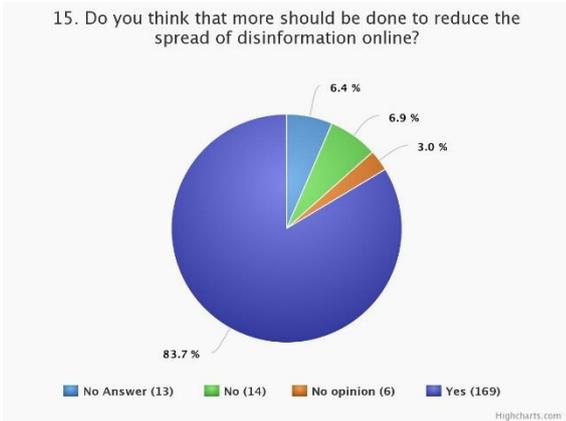
Other measures include fact-checking sites, rating of information sources based on user experience, case studies about disinformation, books and guides about disinformation and the functioning of digital media.

Google listed several measures: labelling the sources of news content and tools that inform consumers of those sources; labelling of stories in Google News e.g., opinion, local, highly cited, in depth; designing a user experience that highlights various perspectives from multiple sources and other related articles. This should give users the possibility to check facts, see other relevant information, and get a more complete understanding of the story.

**V. Future actions**

**18- Should more be done? <sup>7</sup>**

With regard to possible future actions, 84% of organisations and journalists think that more should be done to reduce the spread of disinformation online.



The question was debated between a few organisations and journalists that call for immediate legislative actions on online platforms and a majority that prefers a voluntary industry-led approach but did not exclude regulation as a fall-back option. In that model public authorities would act as backstop regulators in non-compliance with industry self-

<sup>7</sup> Question for organisations and journalists only

regulation and step in if the system fails. Respondents supported media literacy and awareness-raising.

There was support for a holistic, multidimensional approach to implement self-regulation, with the involvement and voluntary cooperation of all stakeholders and using a combination of measures. The aim would be to tackle not just the fake news phenomenon, but also the wider issue of information disorder. Although respondents replied from their national perspective, they passed a clear message that EU action would give greater legal certainty for the platforms by clarifying their obligations in all EU countries. The proliferation of national initiatives risks fragmenting the European response to this issue.

Reasons to favour self-regulation instead of legislation include first, ensuring that direct legislation does not counter the freedom of information and stifle free speech, in particular measures that aim to limit the spread of fake news. Any measures should be prudent and proportionate to avoid any suboptimal outcome such as arbitrary censorship. Civil society organisations, online platforms and news organisations said that a sufficiently objective definition of misinformation (or fake news) is a prerequisite to avoid that risk. They encourage the creation of independent research bodies or observatories on disinformation with public and private support to better understand the phenomenon and its social impact. This research should help define the right policies, differentiating between news that may prompt legal actions based on existing rules e.g. libel or slander, and news that seek to influence or destabilise democratic institutions without being illegal.

Another reason in favour of self-regulation is the idea that a positive approach to developing a sound information ecosystem is more effective than working by regulations and legislative initiatives.

Self-regulation is also considered more effective and practical than regulation in the short term. Its supporters proposed different measures such as fact-checking with calls to establish a European community of fact-checkers bringing together representatives from the media, online platforms, NGOs, academics etc. Fact-checking teams in newsrooms exist and are spreading. Fact-checkers could develop "credibility indexes" or "kite-marking" for trusted providers as a recognised system of external regulation. That would establish a basis against which to evaluate a news source or an article. The mark would indicate whether content was produced following good journalistic standards. These systems would help to make kite-marked news providers more prominent in news feeds/search results so that legitimate news sources are easily discoverable and not drowned out by fake news, which would have less prominence. The advertising industry for instance, uses brand safety tools to prevent advertising being misplaced on websites that host illegal and legal but harmful content.

Parallel to fact-checking, it was suggested that social media empower its users and provide tools for marking and debunking fake news to allow flagging misleading and pseudo-scientific content posted in social networks. A general perception was that the reaction to fake news should always be balanced and proportionate to its content and possible effects, otherwise the result may be a wider spread of fake news.

Despite the positive prospects of fact-checking and debunking websites, along with promoting access to alternative sources, it was argued that once the fake news is diffused efforts to fight it come late. More pro-active measures should be taken. In addition, flagging and rating may produce counter effects such as limiting legal content.

The use of artificial intelligence on news dissemination platforms to improve the verification of sources and facts and prevent bots that artificially increase the volume and speed of some news is another possibility. Block-chain technology to record verification/debunking claims around news content was also mentioned. These tools may have the negative effect of “machines” making decisions on removing or hampering access to content that could ultimately affect freedom of speech.

The limited proposals for regulating the activities of social platforms focus on several issues.

First, some news organisations including broadcasters argue that there is a need for a level playing field between media service-providers and platform operators. Under current EU and national rules, publishers have legal liability for the content they publish, while intermediary platforms and search engines as providers of information storage services are exempt from legal liability for the content published on their platforms due to the safe harbour provisions of the E-commerce Directive. Rules should change to recognise that these platforms also have editorial responsibility since they decide through algorithms on the content provided to their users. A regulatory change would make platforms liable for the content they publish. Large distributors of news/information online would be subject to the same defamation laws as media companies. As one respondent puts it, legislators should seek solutions to ensure that the public can expect the same level of protection from harmful content/information no matter how they access content.

Some news organisations also say that legislative measures on transparency of algorithms would help prevent unfair or discriminatory treatment of media service-providers, and would facilitate the creation, distribution and findability of quality content. Transparency rules on algorithm policies used by platforms would let users know which factors determine the information they access through platforms. Rules on transparency could also include some limitations to make citizens less transparent to platforms and not so easily targeted.

Calls for transparency also refer to the ownership of the media through which people get informed as well as for accountability and transparency on the digital advertising model. Many news and civil society organisations criticize platforms' current business model for trying to maximise traffic and audience regardless of the quality of the information. This drives advertising revenues away from traditional media. The disseminators of fake news and the online platforms profit from clicks and views of fake news stories. A policy against disinformation should limit the advertising revenues of those platforms that create and distribute fake news. One option would be to oblige platforms to monitor advertising and its funding following established good practice. There should be an obligation for platforms to provide sufficient information about the buyers of political ads on their platforms and on the amount spent on advertisement.

News and civil society organisations see the above measures in a wider context where public authorities should sustain and reinforce the role of public service media. In this regard, it would be necessary to review the current rules towards a favourable framework for quality media and journalism, ensuring truly independent public media. Actions should be taken to promote the sustainability and diversity of the European media landscape, including the financing of quality journalism and fostering its findability in order to restore the trust of people in media outlets that produce reliable and verified news.

Actions in this regard include support to research and innovation, incentives to develop free tools for professionals and the audience to fight fake news and to innovate within a climate that promotes multiple approaches by media start-ups.

Along with co-regulatory measures, media literacy and awareness-raising campaigns can address the risks of fake news. Media literacy includes actions to empower the audience in particular youth, teaching them how to recognise reliable sources of news, fostering critical thinking, giving citizens more control over the information they choose to receive.

Media literacy actions should also seek to empower journalists through training of journalists on data literacy, data narrative, data visualization and collection.

Finally, citizens' replies to open questions indicate a clear concern for censorship that would limit the freedom of expression, and a significant wish for greater transparency, school education and media literacy.

### **19- Actors best placed to take action**

Citizens were asked to rank the three best options from a list of possible actors to address disinformation online. Although media organisations appear to be the most favoured (58% overall), public authorities had almost similar support and it was the category that more citizens ranked as the best option (22%). Action by online platforms and citizens follow, with civil society organisations receiving less support. This result supports the approach preferred by respondents to the previous question, whereby a self-regulatory approach with the involvement of all stakeholders was perceived as efficient provided it was backed by public authorities.

Citizens suggested other actors to take action to address disinformation online, such as for instance an independent mechanism –authority, agency or poll of experts, while expressing some concern toward censorship. Replies also suggested action by schools and researchers.

### **20- Measures by online platforms**

Organisations and journalists suggested many measures online platforms could take to improve users' access to reliable information and prevent the spread of disinformation online. Many of these were presented, and range from general principles to specific technical and regulatory measures.

There was support to the principle that any measures intended to improve users' access to reliable information should not go against freedom of expression, privacy and due process and should be subject to effective supervision. Measures should be compatible with the principles of necessity and proportionality and should include correction mechanisms to address any impact on freedom of expression, media diversity or other counterproductive effects. Platforms should not censor content pre-emptively or decide what is true or not. Another proposed principle is that platforms through which citizens get their information should follow journalistic standards and ethics and take responsibility for not spreading disinformation campaigns. They should adopt codes of good practice and provide full and transparent principles for relations with producers of journalistic content.

In addition, many news media, in particular broadcasters, said that online platforms should accept their editorial responsibilities and be subject to existing liability and obligations and to online self-regulation such as press codes. They should implement a general "duty of care" and be accountable for the content they share. However, it seems difficult to reconcile this with the previous request that platforms should not be put in charge of deciding what content is appropriate for sharing as it creates the risk of private actors infringing on the right of free expression, particularly where fake news cannot be considered illegal content.

Google, Mozilla and some industry organisations supported the need to counter disinformation. However, they cautioned against regulatory intervention to change the liability regime in the e-Commerce Directive or a "one-size-fits-all" definition of platforms as this would not acknowledge the different types and solutions to make meaningful progress. For these stakeholders a thorough understanding of the issue and a clear definition of the problem is a necessary pre-condition before adopting any measures.

The measures proposed at technical level mainly refer to management of news and information, transparency and media literacy.

On content, civil society organisations and news media requested that social platforms should be more pro-active in fact-checking and flagging fake news, combining human and automated solutions, and provide information on whether content has been generated by humans or machines<sup>8</sup>. They should also inform of the source and the promoter of content and verify where possible the reputation of the sources, while respecting data protection rules and anonymous speech. Setting up an index of unreliable sources was suggested. Checking different sources before publishing any information would also improve users' access to reliable information. Connected to this is the proposal to allow users to grade fake news, and possibly stop its dissemination with one click. Limiting or blocking sources or online accounts known to have provided incorrect information was proposed, although such restrictive measures in particular content deletion, gathered less support than those promoting the visibility of quality information.

In order to assess the effectiveness of fact-checking, flagging and take-down measures, it was proposed to keep an archive of deleted content and set up prevention, complaint and appeal mechanisms, including the obligation to publish replies by concerned parties.

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<sup>8</sup> Some respondents said information coming from bots should not be published

Another suggestion was to add links to reliable public and private professional media sources, making this information easily findable and perhaps giving it some priority. This would ensure that reliable information is not drowned out by fake news sites<sup>9</sup>.

The use of artificial intelligence for the above measures was both praised and discouraged. An advantage of artificial intelligence is that it can rapidly deal with numerous posts and news. Yet some think it is not intelligent enough for delicate and sensitive issues such as public conversation. A news organisation proposed that providers of artificial intelligence work with news organisations in each market where they operate to train the artificial intelligence.

A second set of measures refer to transparency. Civil society organisations and news media said that online platforms should be more transparent about their activities and algorithms so that users know how they affect the information recommended to them. This could include changing the terms of access and use of platforms to offer users the choice of algorithms without platforms monitoring their online behaviour using personal data. Another option is to design algorithms that expose users to a wide range of information and opinions i.e. 'exposure diversity' or 'serendipity effect'.

Under this transparency policy, platforms could cooperate and share data with independent researchers, respecting data protection principles i.e. data should be anonymised in order to assess the impact of current algorithms and the effectiveness of fact-checking and flagging. That would include accepting basic accountability and publishing transparency reports on the platforms' activities.

Another transparency option strongly supported by civil society organisations were measures to enable users to easily access and understand platforms' editorial and content policies and terms of service and how they are enforced, and apply these policies by removing content or disable the accounts of those that do not respect the terms.

Civil society organisations and news media argued that online platforms should review their advertising business strategies to ensure that they do not negatively affect the diversity of ideas and opinions. Content aiming to misinform citizens should not be used to fuel advertising revenue. The review could lead to a removal of financial incentives for creating 'fake news' and eventually to a reduction of advertisement revenues based on fake news. Sponsored content should be clearly marked as such. The ad-driven business model should respect people's privacy, data and preferences.

Online platforms should also support and finance global, independent media literacy initiatives and awareness-raising and better inform their users of the danger of fake news. They could also contribute to a public fund to finance public media and news literacy programs as well as quality journalism.

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<sup>9</sup> In its response about other measures by online platforms in preventing the spread of disinformation, Google said that the company has "*adjusted our signals to help surface more authoritative pages and demote low-quality content and continue to address this challenge*".

When asked about the effectiveness of a closed list of measures by online platforms, citizens share the opinion that investing in educating and empowering users (76%), informing users when certain content was generated or spread by a bot (76%) and further limit advertisement revenues flowing to websites publishing fake news (64%) would be effective in preventing the spread of disinformation.

71% of responding organisations and journalists share citizens' views on the need for investment in educating and empowering users for better assessing and using online information. However, their views on other options differ. 69% of organisations and journalists support new forms of cooperation with media outlets, fact-checkers and civil society organisations to counter fake news. 64% of respondents support the role of civil society organisations to improve monitoring and debunking of fake news, 61% support ranking information from reliable sources higher and display it in search results or news feeds, as well limiting advertisement revenues for websites publishing fake news; 60% think a transparency measure such as informing users about the criteria and/or algorithms used to display content could be effective.

Organisations and journalists do not think that a more active role of end-users of online platforms would have a significant impact in preventing the spread of fake news: 40% of respondents thought that giving users more control to personalise the display of content would have low or no impact at all. Allowing direct flagging of suspicious content between social media users was not seen as promising: 36% expect low or no impact at all. These results are in line with the responses to the question about readers' awareness, where a large majority of organisations and journalists said that readers are not sufficiently aware of how to fact-check news.

## **21- Measures by news media organisations**

On the question about possible measures by news media organisations, news media and civil society organisations stressed that the public should have access to trusted journalism and legitimate news stories in order to recover its confidence in 'quality journalism'. Some news media underlined their support to the European dual system of quality public service media and commercial media, given their special role in supporting the democratic, cultural and societal needs of European countries. Giving higher visibility to quality journalism and ensuring the presence of news media organisations on all platforms to reach out to all segments of society particularly young people, would be critical to meet this objective. However, responses acknowledged the limits of traditional news media to respond to the disinformation phenomenon with falling advertising revenues that threaten to undermine investment in quality journalism. This brings the sustainability of the business model to the discussion.

The most mentioned measure by civil society and news media organisations, is that journalists apply self-regulation and professional standards to deliver reliable and accurate information, including a right of correction and/or reply to tackle false statements. As put by one professional organisation, journalists should just do their job. That includes verification and use of different information sources for an objective, pluralistic presentation of the facts. Respondents supported that media organisations use fact-checking tools through their

own teams or independent bodies. They could also set up fact-checker teams within online platforms to identify and debunk fake news. Use of different labels depending on the reliability of the source was also suggested, as well as informing about the sources, the forms of research and the methods used by the news media to check information. The effects of fact-checking by definition ex-post could be supported by a more proactive coverage of 'fake news', propaganda and disinformation as part of their news services, including the offering of counter-narratives and/or corrections. One press agency proposed an EU/international database containing debunked fake news and pictures to avoid their re-use.

Another claim especially by news media is the need for more transparency and accountability of media organizations on their editorial policy and financing. News media and civil society organisations said news media organisations should implement a code of practice for accountable journalism, reducing or limiting the use of "clickbait" headlines and searching for a balanced and unbiased way of reporting. Over-reliance on online advertising creates a perverse incentive to attract readers via sensationalist headlines. Changing this approach would possibly lead to greater reliance on subscription business models, moving away from a system where some view online platforms as gate-keepers of the content produced by news media.

Many news media organisations requested financial support i.e. long-term direct funding, subsidies or tax breaks to be able to support quality journalism, ensure media pluralism and the independence of newsrooms. There was also a call for a more balanced share of revenues between news media organisations and online platforms. On this Google referred to its flexible sampling system that allows publishers to decide how many if any, free articles they want to provide to potential subscribers based on their own business strategies. In the medium term, others called for a European strategy for the media sector to ensure that the value of the content created flows back to the news media industry. The shift in the business model from clickbait to subscriptions would result in more thoughtful journalism due to loyalty and brand promotion, and decrease the economic pressure. However, this could create problems for some people to access quality information.

Media literacy was a recurrent topic. Respondents argued for a large number of media literacy activities for the public and schools to learn the difference between high-quality media and disinformation outlets. News media organisations insisted on the need to train professionals to understand innovation and new ways in which information is produced and transmitted.

Citizens and organisations and journalists shared similar views about the effectiveness of a suggested list of measures by news media organisations in strengthening reliable information and tackling fake news both.

For instance, over half of them believe that the most effective measure would be educational: helping readers to develop media literacy skills to critically approach online news (52% for citizens and organisations).

Similarly, around 40% of citizens and organisations and journalists believe that helping readers assess information and investing more in new forms of journalism (42% for citizens, 41% for organisations) are effective measures in strengthening reliable information and tackling fake news. Both groups showed interest in the development of media-oriented skills by readers/users.

**22- Measures by civil society<sup>10</sup>**

On the possible measures that civil society could take, all respondents cite media literacy, awareness-raising and fact-checking.

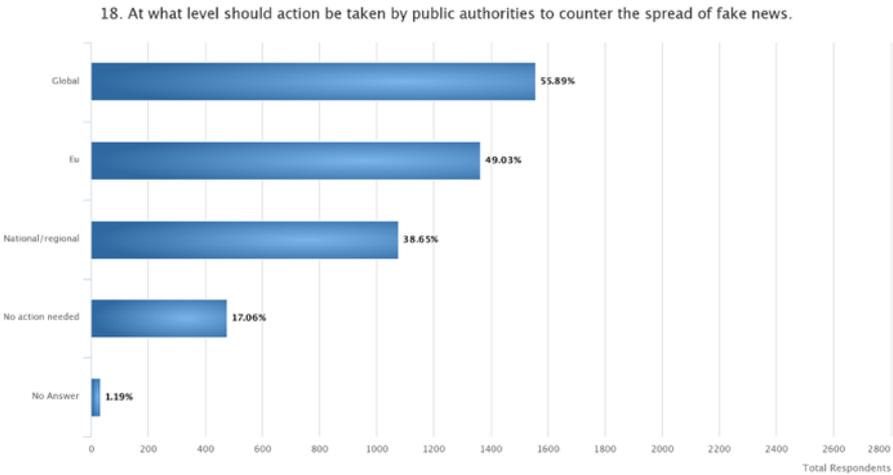
Civil society and news media organisations in particular mentioned support to media literacy for adults and students. Civil society organisations can also raise awareness on the impact of disinformation on citizens, contribute to research on the issue and ensure that citizens’ interests are represented when discussing measures on disinformation.

Fact-checking was the second major measure proposed with respondents referring either to existing fact-checking activities and national organisations active on this, in partnership with news media organisations, or acting on their own.

**23- Measures by public authorities**

Citizens' replies to this question confirm a concern over the fake news theme. Many focused on the need for media literacy education and more research in the field. When asked about the level at which public authorities should counter the spread of fake news, 56% of citizens affirm it should be global, 49% - EU and 39% - national/regional.

45% of the answers by citizens to this question reveal negativity and concerns about censorship and manipulation of information, stressing the need for freedom of speech and respect for democratic values. Numerous respondents were concerned about political parties' campaigns, elections and government influence over these processes.



<sup>10</sup> Question for organisations and journalists only

Organisations' views on the actions of public authorities focused on supporting media literacy among readers and school pupils. Providing skills and knowledge should help to assess and review the sources and factual claims and equip pupils to effectively and safely use the media.

Providing a supportive, protected environment for diverse media and quality information as well as citizens' ability to access and disseminate ideas and information was another proposal. There was clear support for self-regulation via codes of good practice, with many calls cautioning against regulation of harmful but legal content. Respondents stressed the need to have the right tools to fight fake news and safeguard quality and trusted information in today's information system. If public authorities consider any restrictive action to limit fake news, it should be targeted and proportionate and respect the fundamental freedoms of expression and information. It was mentioned how in recent years a number of countries had seen a reduction in these rights.

Similar to citizens' replies, there was clear support by all organisations and journalists for EU actions rather than national or regional ones due to the global nature of the internet.

News media organisations called for supporting quality journalism, including financial schemes. A number of responses asked for an EU strategy for the media sector. They mentioned the role played by public service broadcasters in providing quality information and the need to support it.

As for the possibility to set up an independent body to monitor and enforce mechanisms to stop the dissemination of fake news within organisations and social media platforms, a few respondents suggested penalties and banning sites identified as disseminators of fake news.

Finally, it was suggested that public authorities should also play a role in promoting research to better understand the scope of the issue, its causes, impact, the role of platforms in relation to media plurality or the effectiveness of the proposed technical solutions.

#### **24- Added value of an independent observatory**

The added value of an independent observatory (linking platforms, news media and fact-checking organisations) depends on its specific scope: 54% of respondents support an independent observatory that is a knowledge centre, gathering studies and advising how to tackle disinformation online. Support declines if the scope of the observatory is narrowed to asking fact-checkers to warn about popular social media posts that need flagging (46%) or develop counter narratives (42%). However, the idea was not rejected with 13% declaring it would not be useful for the public.