DIGITAL**GUIDE**

to **Countering Disinformation, Critical Thinking** and **Media Literacy**

What is disinformation and why does it concern us all?

Disinformation is one of the most serious and complex phenomena of the modern digital age. It refers to the spread of **fake, inaccurate, or misleading information,** whether intentionally or not, mainly through the internet and social media platforms. Its purpose may concern the **manipulation of public opinion, the creation of confusion, or the promotion of specific narratives and interests.**

Disinformation is not limited to political issues or electoral processes. It appears in many areas of everyday life, including **health, the environment, the economy, and international affairs.**

For example, false information about medical issues can compromise public health, while misleading content related to social or national matters can **exacerbate fear, insecurity, and social division.** In this way, disinformation **undermines citizens' trust in institutions, the media, and the democratic functioning of society.**

In the digital era, information spreads at an extremely fast pace. Every internet user has the ability to **share content instantly with a wide audience.** A simple **"share" or "like" can contribute to the mass dissemination of false information within minutes,** even without the intention to mislead.

This means that **every citizen is not only a recipient but also a transmitter of information,** increasing individual responsibility for how content is evaluated and shared.

Countering disinformation requires a coordinated effort from **institutions, media organizations, educational institutions, and digital platforms.**

However, the role of the **active and informed citizen is equally crucial.** Developing **critical thinking skills, verifying sources, and using social media responsibly** are essential tools for **protecting truth, social cohesion, and the principles of democracy.**

> We cannot allow this destructive narrative, propaganda and disinformation to spread without confronting it.
>
> **Roberta Metsola,**
> President of the European Parliament

How Disinformation Works on the Internet

Disinformation on the internet does not spread randomly. *It follows specific **psychological and communication mechanisms** that exploit how people read, react to, and share information online.*

Exploitation of Emotions

Messages such as **"If this doesn't make you angry, then you are part of the problem"** are designed to trigger strong emotions such as **anger, fear, or outrage.** When emotions are activated, **critical thinking is reduced,** and users are more likely to **believe or share information without verification.**

Polarization and Division

Statements such as **"You are either with us or against us"** present reality as a conflict between two opposing sides. This technique **increases social division** and **limits meaningful dialogue,** excluding more **complex, balanced, and evidence-based perspectives.**

Creation of Confusion

The spread of **multiple and conflicting versions of the same event,** such as **"No one really knows what happened,"** creates **uncertainty and confusion.** When citizens feel that **there is no clear truth,** they become more **vulnerable to manipulation and disinformation.**

Confirmation of Existing Beliefs

People naturally tend to **trust information that confirms what they already believe.** Disinformation exploits this tendency by **reinforcing biases and stereotypes** while **rejecting opposing viewpoints,** strengthening ideological "echo chambers."

Manipulation of Context

Even **true information can be misleading** when presented **out of context.** By selectively presenting facts, images, or statements, disinformation creates a **false impression without necessarily using completely false content.**

Attacks and Discrediting of Critical Voices

Phrases such as **"Do not listen to him, he is paid"** are used to **undermine the credibility of individuals or sources.** This tactic seeks to **silence criticism,** weaken trust in reliable voices, and **impose a dominant narrative without questioning.**

Understanding these mechanisms is essential. *It enables citizens to **recognize, evaluate, and respond to disinformation,** protecting **truth, democratic dialogue, and informed decision-making.*** *See more.*

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How Disinformation Spreads on the Internet

Disinformation spreads online through specific techniques that exploit human psychology, technology, and the way social media platforms operate.

Five Essential Questions Before Believing or Sharing News

Critical thinking is the most powerful tool against disinformation. Before believing or sharing any information, it is important to ask the following five key questions:

1. What is the source?
Is it reliable, known, and transparent? Does it come from a **recognized media outlet or official institution?**

2. Is it confirmed by other sources?
Do other credible media outlets report the same information, or is it based on a single source?

3. When was it published?
Is the information recent, or is it an old story presented as new?

4. Is it a fact or an opinion?
Are there verifiable facts and evidence, or is it based on personal views, claims, or interpretations?

5. What emotion does it trigger?
If the content provokes **strong emotions such as anger, fear, or outrage,** it is essential to **verify it carefully before sharing.**

⚠ **ATTENTION:**
If you are unsure, do not share it.

Clickbait Headlines
Clickbait headlines are designed to provoke shock, fear, or outrage and encourage immediate clicks. They often contain **exaggerations or misleading wording** that does not reflect the actual content of the article. As a result, **readers may form false impressions before even reading the full information.**

Images or Videos Taken Out of Context
Old, altered, or unrelated images and videos are often presented as if they show current events. This practice creates **misleading impressions** and strengthens the spread of **false or distorted information.**

Fake Accounts and Bots
Fake accounts and automated profiles (bots) are used to artificially increase the popularity of a post. Through **mass sharing, comments, and likes,** they create a **false sense of credibility and consensus,** influencing public perception and opinion.

Social Media Algorithms
Social media algorithms promote content that generates strong emotional reactions, because it increases user engagement. As a result, **disinformation often spreads faster than factual information,** since it is more likely to trigger **emotional responses such as anger, fear, or surprise.**

⚠ **ATTENTION:**
The stronger the emotional reaction a piece of news provokes, the more careful we should be before trusting or sharing it.

Did you know?
Humorous or satirical content can easily be misinterpreted and perceived as real news, especially when it comes from a platform, country, or cultural context that the audience is not familiar with. Satire is intended for humor or criticism — not for factual information.

The Modern Literacy of Media

Media literacy refers to the ability of citizens to understand, evaluate, and critically use media and digital content platforms.

It is no longer enough to simply know how to use the internet. Citizens must also be able to:

✅ Recognize reliable and trustworthy sources
✅ Understand how algorithms influence what they see online
✅ Distinguish factual information from propaganda and manipulation
✅ Participate responsibly and respectfully in public dialogue

Developing media literacy begins with education, but it concerns people of all ages. Media literacy empowers citizens by helping them **understand, evaluate, and manage information in today's digital environment.** It is an essential tool for **making informed decisions, strengthening critical thinking, and identifying disinformation.**

EU Measures Against Disinformation

The European Union is taking significant measures to protect citizens from disinformation and strengthen media literacy. Through **European policies, legislation, and educational initiatives,** eu promotes **critical thinking, transparency in information, and the responsible use of digital media.**

The **Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD)** requires EU Member States to **promote and strengthen media literacy skills and report on their progress.**

At the same time, the **European Commission has issued guidelines** to support Member States and encourage the **exchange of best practices.** Special attention is given to **video-sharing platforms,** which are required to provide **tools and measures that enhance media literacy and inform users about the safe and responsible use of their services.**

The importance of media literacy is also recognized in the:

European Democracy Action Plan

Media and Audiovisual Action Plan

Digital Education Action Plan

These initiatives establish media literacy as a **strategic priority for strengthening citizens' digital skills across Europe.**

In addition, under the **Code of Practice on Disinformation (2022)** major digital platforms have committed **to develop tools that help users better understand online content, promote critical thinking, and support media literacy initiatives across the European Union.**

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Disinformation and Artificial Intelligence – Deepfakes

The rapid development of **artificial intelligence** has created new and highly complex challenges in the field of **disinformation.** One of the most alarming phenomena is the so-called d**eepfakes:** videos, images, or audio files that are digitally created or manipulated in a way that makes them appear completely authentic.

Through **deepfakes,** individuals may appear to say or do things that never actually happened, influencing **public opinion, political debate,** and even **electoral processes.**

To address these risks, the European Union has adopted the **Artificial Intelligence Act,** which establishes rules on **transparency, accountability,** and the **protection of citizens.**

What we can do:

- **Check the source** of the video or image
- **Look for inconsistencies** in sound, visuals, or movement
- **Seek confirmation** from reliable news outlets
- **Avoid sharing content** if we are not certain of its authenticity

⛔ When the Fake Looks Real: Deepfake Examples

Fake Video of a Political Leader
One of the most well-known **deepfakes** was a digitally altered video in which **Volodymyr Zelenskyy** appeared to **call for surrender.** The video was **fake** and aimed at creating c**onfusion, fear,** and **destabilization** during the war in Ukraine.

Fake Voice in Political Interventions
In the United States, automated robocalls circulated using a **fake voice** of **Joe Biden,** urging citizens **not to participate in elections.** The incident highlighted the serious risk of **manipulating the democratic process** through **artificial intelligence** and **deepfakes.**

Deepfake Images That Appear Real
The viral image of **Pope Francis** wearing a modern **puffer jacket** was created using **artificial intelligence** and was **not real.** The case demonstrated how easily **AI can generate convincing yet false images,** misleading the public and reinforcing **disinformation.**

Financial Fraud Using Fake Voices
In **corporate environments,** cases have been recorded where **deepfake voices of executives** were used to issue **fake bank transfer orders,** causing **significant financial losses.**

Manipulation of Journalistic Material
Deepfakes have been used to **alter interviews and public statements,** undermining the **credibility of media organizations** and increasing **public distrust** toward information sources.

How the European Union Tackles Disinformation

*The European Union addresses disinformation **as a serious threat to democracy, social cohesion, and citizens' trust in authorities.** For this reason, **EU has developed a comprehensive framework of policies, tools, and actions that intergrade prevention, education, transparency, and regulatory monitoring and supervision.***

The **European Commission** organizes and aligns initiatives to combat **disinformation online.** Through the **Digital Services Act (DSA)**, the **European Union** sets **clear obligations** for Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs), requiring **enhanced transparency,** limiting the spread of **harmful content,** and ensuring **accountability for the algorithms** that determine what users see.

At the same time, the **EU invests in media literacy.** The **European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO)** operates as a **pan-European network** of **researchers, fact-checkers,** and organizations, contributing to the **analysis of disinformation** and strengthening **citizens' resilience.**

In addition, the platform **EUvsDisinfo** identifies and exposes **organized disinformation campaigns** targeting the **European Union.**

The role of the **European Parliament** is also particularly important, as it actively participates in shaping **European digital legislation.** The Parliament promotes **transparency,** the **protection of citizens,** and the **safeguarding of freedom of expression,** while also implementing **educational initiatives, information campaigns,** and **awareness-raising programmes.**

Through **public debates, educational tools,** and information networks such as **Europe Direct,** the **European Union** brings the fight against disinformation closer to its citizens.

Overall, the **EU's approach** does not aim to **silence information,** but to **empower citizens** so they can **recognize, assess,** and **counter disinformation,** contributing to a **free, safe,** and **democratic digital ecosystem.**

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Awareness and Knowledge as a Shield Against Disinformation

The effective fight against **disinformation** begins with **awareness** and **knowledge.** It is important to understand the **strategies** and **tactics** used to manipulate information, so that we can identify **misleading content** early and respond with **critical thinking** and **responsibility.**

Useful and reliable European information resources include:

- **The European Parliament website on disinformation**

- **The European Commission website on disinformation**

- **The EUvsDisinfo** platform of the European External Action Service

- **The European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO)**

- **The EU DisinfoLab**

These sources provide **reliable information, fact-checking tools,** and **educational material** to support a better understanding of disinformation.

Countering Disinformation: A Shared Responsibility.

At an everyday level, we can:

- Avoid sharing doubtful or unverified information
- Report false or misleading content on digital platforms
- Support quality, reliable, and evidence-based journalism
- Participate in public debate with respect, arguments, and responsibility

⚠️ *Lies threaten democracy — but so does indifference.*

Did you know?

Deepfake technology has become increasingly **accessible,** making **content manipulation** easier than ever. **Voice cloning** can now be achieved with as little as **20–30 seconds of audio,** while a convincing **deepfake video** can be created in approximately **45 minutes,** even using **freely available software.**

Disinformation Quiz:

Test your knowledge and uncover the tactics behind information manipulation.

Useful European Resources on Disinformation, Fake News and Media Literacy in the EU

*Below you will find **reliable European platforms and tools** that provide **information, fact-checking services, and educational material to help tackle disinformation:***

European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO)

EDMO is the largest **European network** bringing together **researchers, fact-checkers,** and organizations with the aim of **detecting, analyzing,** and **countering disinformation.** It provides **educational materials,** in-depth analyses, and **media literacy tools** for both citizens and professionals.

EUvsDisinfo Platform

EUvsDisinfo is a **European Union initiative** that identifies, analyzes, and exposes cases of **disinformation.** It operates a **database containing thousands of documented cases,** along with **educational resources** to support awareness and resilience.

Media Literacy – European Commission

The **European Commission** promotes initiatives that help citizens to develop **critical thinking skills,** better understand the **media landscape,** and recognize **disinformation** while strengthening **digital skills** across Europe.

European Parliament – Disinformation and Fake News

The **European Parliament** provides **information resources, policy analyses, and educational toolkits** to help citizens understand and counter **fake news** and disinformation.

EU DisinfoLab

EU DisinfoLab is a European organization that investigates **disinformation campaigns,** develops **analytical tools,** and contributes to the protection of **democracy** and **information integrity.**

Knowledge is power. Critical thinking is our shield.

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