

EDMO 2022 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

On 13-14 June 2022, the European Digital Media Observatory held its 2022 Annual Conference in Brussels. Reaching its second year of activities, this conference was the opportunity to explore the achievements of EDMO to better understand, detect, and tackle disinformation including in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and of the current conflict in Ukraine.

During the one-and-a-half-day conference, key experts and stakeholders contributed to explore a wide range of topics including disinformation around the Ukraine conflict and how to tackle it, the relation between neurosciences and disinformation, national and multinational efforts to strengthen media and information literacy, developments ahead of the revised Code of Practice on Disinformation and on access to data for research purposes.

The event reflected the EDMO approach, by ensuring a multi-stakeholder and multidisciplinary dialogue, bringing together European and international media and policy practitioners, academics, fact-checkers, regulators, and members of civil society organizations.

Disinformation and the War in Ukraine

Panelists:

- Chair: **Miguel Poiares Maduro** | European University Institute and Chair of EDMO Executive Board
- **Tommaso Canetta** | Pagella Politica and EDMO
- **Alina Bârgăoanu** | National University of Political Studies and Public Administration and EDMO Advisory Board
- **Kalina Bontcheva** | University of Sheffield and EDMO Advisory Board
- **Gianni Riotta** | Luiss Guido Carli, IDMO – Italian Digital Media Observatory and EDMO Advisory Board
- **Dominika Hajdu** | GLOBSEC
- **Christine Buhagiar** | Agence France-Presse and DE FACTO Observatory of Information
- **Cristophe Leclercq** | Euractiv and EDMO Advisory Board

EDMO fact-checking network has around 40 members. The network gathers information from across the EU that is then analyzed centrally. This analysis has identified clear narratives during the first months of the war:

1. Ukraine is a Nazist country.
2. President Zelenskyi is personally unfit to lead and a Nazi
3. Western media publishes “fake news”
4. Exaggerated economic consequences of the war for Europe
5. Ukrainian refugees are violent and ungrateful & treated better than EU nationals.

EDMO Ukraine task force’s discussions have highlighted that disinformation flows through several channels: mainstream media, digital platforms, entertainment, etc. Disinformation is also cross-lingual and cross-border. Fact-checks and other debunks conducted in one EU country should be used, with the help of automated translation, to support prebunking in other EU languages and countries.

It was highlighted that some of the same channels and actors that used to spread anti-vaccination information have shifted to supporting pro-Russian disinformation.

Much of the focus in the fight against disinformation has been only on the western or English-speaking part of the western world, leaving Central and Eastern Europe unattended. Narrative laundering is effective in this part of Europe: making disinformation look like it’s originating from western politicians or other sources.

One of the challenges is that the basis for spreading disinformation regarding Ukraine in Europe has been allowed to grow since 2014. In Italy, an Ipsos study has found about 20 % of the population dealing actively and regularly with disinformation, plus 10 % mainly on the receiving side. In some of the Central and Eastern European countries, up to 40 % of the population has been receptive to Russian war propaganda, as found out in a Globsec study.

Regarding the worst events during the war, such as the massacre in Bucha, journalists stressed how important it is to get all the details right before publishing a story. Attacks questioning the authenticity will come anyway but will be less credible if they can’t pinpoint even tiny errors. Journalists need to be equipped with new skills, examine thoroughly on the ground, use fact-checking techniques and work with other trustworthy media outlets. It was further pointed that the digital platforms will need to boost the impact and visibility of fact-checks, since many fact-checking organisations have limited resources on their own.

There was widespread concern that disinformation and fact-checking fatigue will result from the current information war. In such a scenario people will stop caring, which is one of the points of spreading disinformation.

Overall, the panel was looking eagerly towards the upcoming publication of the Code of Practice on Disinformation that was scheduled to happen a couple of days after the conference.

Greetings from the European Commission

Key-note: Director Giuseppe Abbamonte

Director Abbamonte stated that EDMO's second annual conference with its various panels is a celebration of the remarkable progress made by EDMO and the whole European Union. The EU has started working against disinformation several years ago and Russia's use of disinformation as a tool in hybrid warfare has given impetus to this work. He recapped the steps that led to the definition of disinformation by the High-level Group, the Code of Practice against disinformation, and the eventual formation of EDMO. Co-operation between European authorities and the platforms has developed, but also been put to test by disinformation related to European elections 2019, COVID-19 and Russia's aggression in Ukraine. He highlighted the rapid growth of EDMO's activities in its first two years and underlined its leading role in the European response to disinformation.

Nevertheless, much remains to be done. We must create transparency to platforms' actions against disinformation. EDMO's report is a good basis for that. Director Abbamonte also expressed his happiness about the founding of the European Fact-checkers Standards Network (EFCSN).

In the end, Director Abbamonte announced the upcoming publication of the reinforced Code of Practice, that was due three days after the conference. Implementation of the Code is key in e.g. demonetization of disinformation and improving researcher access to platform data. Developing structural indicators to evaluate the impact of the actions taken is crucial. So, a lot of work is ahead, and the role of the Permanent Taskforce on the Code of Practice will be essential in coordinating this work.

The neural processes underlying our resilience and susceptibility to disinformation

Key-note: Prof. Paul Verschure

How can we think of the impact of disinformation on the human brain and how that might affect the dynamics of disinformation.

The brain is an organ with 90 billion neurons and equal amount of non-neuronal cells which are connected, which means 1 quadrillion of connections, called synapses and every synapsis itself is a complex biochemical machine. The brain also comprises 180000 km of myelinated fibers. It is a densely connected network of nodes. We are the product of evolution and so does the brain. Humans are not the only ones having a brain and brains are different but do also share many design features. Brains evolve to generate action (which ensures reproduction and evolution).

The brain is a mediator, between the body and the outside world on one side and action on the other side. Understanding this mediation step is key to understand how it works when faced with disinformation. The brain operates in a very coordinated way. On the one hand we will have systems that are highly conserved in evolution and bring to immediate responses (e.g. running away when there is a threatening stimulus). These are fast and strongly genetically controlled and help us survive. On the other hand new systems come in that are more memory intense, the brain as a system expanding its point of view and including a broader time-space window, to start making predictions about, for instance, the relationship between things. It starts learning about the world. Moving further, there are systems that work in abstract terms, that make advanced plans. In case of emergency (and of quick actions to survive), we fall back in the primitive systems of the brain. On the other hand, in case of less pressure we start to rely on the more complex systems. The brain is continuously repositioning itself in the tradeoff between robust and fast and deliberate but slow. The tradeoffs and how they are solved lead to the expression of different kinds of biases, which in turn is why we are not rational. Biases are inherited from our evolutionary history. If the brain is always responding to the world in a quick and subconscious way, how can we know what we do? Who is the observer of the system? (Michael Gazzaniga). This illustrates that within the brain we might have multiple systems that do not always work together and do not always inform each other but still have to work in a coherent way.

The brain is continuously interpreting the world and making models of the world. According to the free energy principle by Karl Friston, the brain always compares the information it gets from the world with its internal models and from there it will get an error which then becomes dominant in how the brain is processing information. There is a prediction, a perception and an error between the two. To reduce that error, either we act or we change the model. In that space of error the brain is continuously balancing its components. Expectation of reward is configured based on the world model.

The brain has a number of core systems. As an example, when we are angry contextual processing is shut down and attention is given to details. The brain can have lots of ideas, memories, content, etc. The content space of the brain is infinite but is regulated by the neuromodulatory systems. Disinformation is not necessarily impacting the space of content, but the operating system that is defining how the brain processes disinformation, creates memories and translates into action. We see a drift in how social media is amplifying radicalization paths. The economy of emotions attacks the brain's operating system. Negative emotions decontextualize experiences memories, shut down contextual processing and drive reactions (e.g. sharing and clicking). This is what algorithms exploit.

How can we respond? What we are up against is not the humans and the bots, it is the algorithms because they dramatically change the scale. How to build resilience against algorithmic distortion and creation of content? Algorithms will soon produce disinformation. How to build resilience in the consumers of disinformation? We are talking about the memory systems of human beings. Resilience has to come from context as the algorithms play with emotions. Active learning helps in building this resilience. In addition, given that there are mental health risks associated with social media algorithms, they should first go through a robust certification process before entering the market.

Media and Information Literacy

Panelists:

- Chair: **Sally Reynolds** | Media & Learning Association and EDMO Advisory Board
- **Divina Frau Meigs** | Sorbonne Nouvelle University, UNESCO and Savoir*Devenir
- **Emma Goodman** | London School of Economics and Political Science and EDMO
- **Juliane von Reppert-Bismarck** | Lie Detectors
- **Karina Stasiuk-Krajewska** | SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities and CEDMO – Central European Digital Media Observatory
- **Vitor Tomé** | CIES-ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon and IBERIFIER – Iberian Digital Media Research and Fact-Checking Hub
- **Mikko Salo** | Faktabaari and NORDIS – NORdic observatory for digital media and information DISorders
- **Martina Chapman** | Independent consultant in media literacy
- **Sonia Livingstone** | London School of Economics and Political Science and EDMO Advisory Board

The session gathered a number of experts on media and information literacy (MIL) to present relevant work and to discuss the challenges of MIL strategies and initiatives.

Projects like [You Check!](#), [You Verify!](#), [Crossover](#), [Lie Detectors](#) and [Media Literacy Ireland](#) were briefly introduced as well as the work done by the [IBERIFIER](#) hub, the [CEDMO](#) hub, [EDMO Ireland](#) and the [NORDIS](#) hub. It was also an occasion to highlight that EDMO, taking into account the significant amount of valuable initiatives already in place and the work the hubs are committed to, is focusing on supporting existing MIL initiatives rather than creating new ones. EDMO is aiming is to provide an overview of the situation of MIL in the EU and to produce country profiles for each

Member State. EDMO will also produce a database of good practices demonstrating interesting and valuable elements of MIL projects. Trainings on MIL, such as on evaluation, have also been organised.

The wider discussion covered various areas. It was stressed that when addressing MIL, it is important to look at the broader picture. The concept of transliteracy was mentioned, as a combination of three information cultures, namely: info-media (media culture), info-doc (documentation and information science culture) and info-data (data and algorithms). Overall simplification does not always fit the MIL discourse - for example, MIL cannot be reduced to news literacy alone, and digital journalism cannot be reduced to fact-checking. MIL is by definition a multidimensional subject.

Overall, there is a transition taking place from the traditional MIL approach to an approach that fits with the digital world. The importance of analysing the role media have as a basic source of knowledge for citizens and how media affect the way the audience interprets the world was also noted. Also, it is of key importance to try to understand, in case of schools, where on the internet children access information and if teachers are in the same places (which is not often the case).

MIL is a moving target within a changing media landscape and needs to be continuously evolving to provide a multidimensional package of knowledge and skills fit for citizens' needs. It is a progressive exercise that requires a pedagogy and a society to support and believe in the effort, as well as proper permanent financing. It works best as a long-term solution rather than a short and reactive one – deep learning rather than just quick messages.

There was overall agreement that MIL should be compulsory in school curricula. In most EU countries, it was noted, it is currently a transversal topic across other disciplines (which makes it also hard to evaluate it and to carry out relevant research). The Nordic countries were cited as a stand out example where MIL tends to be a discipline in itself.

Panellists also stressed that it was crucial not to forget about the adult population, and that MIL initiatives should guarantee that there is no discrimination between citizens living in urban and rural areas.

For MIL initiatives to be effective in reaching their goals, evaluation and impact assessments are fundamental. However, given that improving MIL is a process of behaviour change, evaluation is not straightforward and is still not sufficiently funded.

The complexity of the subject, the different actors involved, the diverse target groups and diverse subject knowledge required, and concerns over funding, are reflected in the eagerness that stakeholders show for collaboration, coordination and leadership.

Research and Disinformation

Panelists:

- Chair: **Lisa Ginsborg** | European University Institute and EDMO
- **Jessica Walter** | Aarhus University and EDMO
- **Paul Verschure** | Radboud University and EDMO Advisory Board
- **Paolo Cesarini** | European Media and Information Fund Management Committee

The panel focused on current research needs and gaps in the field of disinformation.

The idea that in order to tackle online disinfo need to better understand it, which lies at the heart of the ethos and mission of EDMO, remains as true now as it was two years ago when EDMO started its activities, and four years ago when the HLEG recognized the need for continued research on the impact of disinformation in Europe as one of the five pillars of its multi-dimensional approach. Excellent research is of course being carried out and published. Yet much more is needed to better understand and inform evidence-based policy making at European level. Policy developments in the field have increasingly recognized the fundamental role to be played by independent scientific research on disinformation. With the push towards transparency in the European regulatory response to disinformation comes an increased burden and need for independent research to take on the role of fostering accountability and public scrutiny of the actors and dynamics of disinformation.

The findings from the recent EDMO survey on Research focus and gaps on digital disinformation within the EU, were presented and highlighted some of the needs and gaps identified by researchers (full report is available [here](#)). Among the gaps identified were the need for multidisciplinary and longitudinal approaches, the need to address the challenge of multi-linguality and the need to reach specific regions including Baltic and Nordic, as well as Eastern and central European countries. Other gaps identified in research included the impact on specific parts of the population such as children and youths, societal costs of disinformation, and the need to understand better contextual influences and neglected areas, such as gender and sexuality. Overall, there was a high interest in EDMO and the potential it can play in bringing together the research community and disseminating existing research.

A life science grounded perspective on disinformation, should also be part of the research and education agenda. In this context there is a need for greater research attention to fully algorithmically generated content and how to 'fight algorithms with algorithms' and to move from reacting to content to anticipating future content. This would include using AI for good to look into future attack scenarios. Another topic that deserves increasing attention by research is individual differences and variety in personalities and capabilities as captured by neurodiversity, as well as the complexities of different types of memory and how memory works. Similar topics deserve increased attention in media literacy efforts, including defining our shared ontology, counterfactual reasoning in education, mentalizing, working memory and attention.

Similarly, combating disinformation as a form of pursuit of truth risks becoming protracted and futile effort that does not deal with root causes, which is re-establishing trust and the need to look at preconditions for disinformation to spread. Two approaches in the response to disinformation remain crucial. The first is repressive and includes the need for strong regulations, including regarding the transparency of algorithms, the need for terms of service consistently to be enforced, action against what is illegal online, and transparency around harmful content moderation. But a redressive approach is also important, with the need for strong media ecosystem, sustainable system of professional media, media literacy. Third, research is fundamental as the basis for good policies, which includes the need for increased knowledge on a variety of issues, including: (i) technological features that shape current digital media ecosystem, black box algorithms, dark patterns, AI for good, (ii) actors and networks at work in distribution of disinformation in Europe and life cycle analysis of disinformation, which could inform tools to be actioned (iii) better view on systemic effects of digital transformation of information and communication structures, both at individual cognitive level and societal level. It is important to understand role of algorithmically generated content for future, and how news media can contribute to re-establish civic engagement and shared sense of realities. (iv) Need to have better understanding of indicators that could measure harms, how to have common taxonomy of disinformation. (v) Knowledge needs to translate in enhanced media literacy approaches and methods. A number of stumbling blocks remain: data, coordination infrastructure and funds.

New Code of Practice on Disinformation

Panelists:

- Chair: **Paula Gori** | European University Institute and EDMO
- **Krisztina Stump** | European Commission DG CNECT
- **Lubos Kuklis** | European Platform of Regulatory Authorities
- **Elda Brogi** | European University Institute and EDMO
- **Oreste Pollicino** | Bocconi University
- **Clement Wolf** | Google
- **Caroline Greer** | TikTok
- **Eva Maydell** | Member of the European Parliament

The session focused on the strengthened code of practice on disinformation that was then signed a few days after the EDMO conference and gathered a number of stakeholders guaranteeing a multi-dimensional debate.

Disinformation, it was recalled, aims at creating confusion, at making citizens believe nothing with the ultimate result of distorting society and eroding trust in institutions and media. By triggering confusion, frustration, fear (e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine), it leads to act emotionally rather than rationally.

When analyzing and tackling disinformation, the focus is broader than content only and it also involves behaviors, tools and actors. Civil society and third-party organisations and academia play a

fundamental role in fact-checking, elaborating and implementing media literacy campaigns, monitoring, analyzing and studying. Overall, it is recalled, tackling disinformation requires a multidimensional approach.

The new code aims to address the weaknesses of its first version, as a result of the first years of implementation and that are clearly outlined in its assessments. The 2018 Code was the first of its kind and the natural step to start with. It was however mentioned that it was too much reflecting the US based approach of the so-called marketplace of ideas, that is grounded on freedom of expression as stated in the First Amendment of the US Constitution. The publication of the EC Guidance on Strengthening the Code of Practice and the proposal for a co-regulatory tool such as the Digital Services Act (DSA) helped in leaving behind the US metaphor, when working on the new Code.

Players from different segments of the industry worked together to draft the code (with the help of Prof. Pollicino as honest broker) and the strengthened Code is signed by a diverse set of signatories. The text as such reflects the diversity of the group of stakeholders involved and was an occasion to learn about the different ways disinformation impacts the various services as well as the difference in tools and settings to address it. The importance of setting a framework that works across different kinds of services was highlighted.

The establishment of a permanent taskforce where the signatories continuously implement but also adapt to future legislative and technological improvements, will guarantee that the Code remains a future proof instrument. This, it was reminded, is part of the uniqueness of the Code.

The European Commission expects strong and granular commitment, cooperation and implementation of the strengthened Code. The latter is a complex toolbox containing various elements that can all together be effective. Based on the guidance, it is structured around main areas of commitments, namely: i) demonetization; ii) transparency of political advertising; iii) Integrity of services; iv) users' empowerment; v) empowering researchers; vi) empowering the fact-checking community; vii) setting-up a transparency centre and a taskforce; viii) strong monitoring framework.

For the Code to be effective, its implementation needs to be done in all Members States and in all languages. It needs indeed to be equally implemented across all EU countries to become an effective risk mitigation tool.

Service level indicators and structural indicators will be essential to monitor the implementation of the Code. Service level indicators aim at monitoring the overall enforcement. They will run qualitative and quantitative assessments of the Code, based on the data provided by the signatories themselves. The structural indicators will instead measure the impact of the disinformation phenomenon and the relevant impact of the Code. The development of the methodology for such indicators will be a work in progress, with a set of first indicators to be further finetuned and integrated with further ones. Dialogue with experts will be key.

Access to Data for Research Purposes

Panelists:

- Chair: **Richard Allan** | EDMO Executive Board
- **Rebekah Tromble** | George Washington University and EDMO Advisory Board
- **Andrew Gruen** | Meta
- **Brandon Silverman** | Independent consultant
- **Claes de Vreese** | University of Amsterdam and EDMO Advisory Board
- **Benoît Loutrel** | Autorité de régulation de la communication audiovisuelle et numérique

The panel introduced the draft EDMO Code of Conduct for platform to researcher data access by the WG established by EDMO. The WG came together to tackle the problem that has been known for years, especially to empirical researchers trying to understand impact of online platforms in our everyday lives, including social scientists, civil society and journalists, of how to develop a shared understanding of challenges of responsibilities under GDPR. The WG was launched a year ago and met monthly with the legal support of AWO. Most of the decisions were made on basis on consensus.

The Draft Code contains three key sections: a preamble laying out who is eligible and what type of research is eligible; Part 1 - legal section of code detailing regimes and regulations, which are relevant, and decision trees; Part 2 is operational component and lays out step by step what platforms and researchers need to do to implement code and protect data. It provides risk assessment framework regarding data processing activities, and including required and recommended organizational safeguards. This part was developed through broader consultations with the research community. Other key points discussed in relation to the code included the value of independent intermediary body and the separate responsibilities for different parties outlined in the draft code.

The panel reflected on previously failed attempts at data sharing, and the evolution from early days in which APIs were readily available, privileged access by some researchers, the Social Science One framework and various new instruments provided by platforms over time. Some academic research has also been taking place without platform cooperation, including attempts to scrape platforms, or making use of new opportunities such as data collaboratives. The framework envisaged in the Code aims to ensure research that protects both researchers and platforms. It reflects the recognition that the 'two part model' between platform and academics cannot work, due to imbalances of power, and the risk to undermine the credibility of academics. The 3-part model, includes a public authority/entity to overcome imbalance of power. The intermediary body would remove the need for blessing by platforms, stating both parties have met necessary requirements and responsibilities. An independent intermediary body is therefore crucial to operationalize data regime, which cannot rely on benevolence of platforms, but on a legal framework for access to data.

The need to enhance the capacity of academics to access data of platforms to establish impact of platforms on society is now also a core feature of the DSA. While access to data for academics is a

key element for success of DSA in Europe, its implementation will be challenging. Questions remain about implementation in MSs and whether platform regulation will require several re-iterations, which would lead to delays in the implementation. Hand in and with the regulation of transparency comes the importance of building on the independence of academic researchers, which is at heart of system. Researchers must now step up and fulfil this role. The responsibility now rests with academic community to take up the challenge of doing this type of research. There is a need new generations of researchers, adequately trained, who understand the key questions here. Also funding of research is critical and must be transparent.

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