FACEBOOK
EU Conversations

Misinformation and Access to Accurate Information during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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On 16 June, over 40 representatives of the EU Institutions, national governments and regulators, think tanks, academia and the NGO community participated in a roundtable addressing the complex task of effectively countering misinformation, disinformation and harmful content online. The attention on misinformation and disinformation has intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, more than ever, thoughtful actions to counter misinformation and disinformation, increase access to accurate information and foster media literacy are crucial. But, as our panellists from the European Commission, European Parliament, a Member State Government and civil society pointed out, these actions are not without challenges and consequences, and thus solutions need to be carefully designed.

Defining the problem

It is important that distinctions are made between the content and the actor and behaviour. Misinformation focuses on the former, while disinformation focuses on the latter. Disaggregating these concepts is crucial to define what it is we are trying to tackle and develop a framework to combat the issue holistically. The Facebook speakers explained that the company policies on misinformation and disinformation reflect these distinctions. Actor-based enforcement and behaviour-based enforcement counters disinformation, and involves the removal of accounts or organisations because of the totality of their activity on the platform. On the other hand, content-based enforcement addresses misinformation in the form of specific violations of the Facebook Community Standards.

Facebook's approach to disinformation

Efforts to combat disinformation and influence operations is grounded in actor- and behaviour-based enforcement, e.g. against an entire network engaged in coordinated efforts to manipulate public debate for strategic goals, such as Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour (CIB) and Foreign or Government Interference (FGI). Several policy and product tools are applied to detect and counter such campaigns, including outright removal of accounts, pages and groups involved in the activity. The Facebook representative also explained that other deceptive behaviours are defined in the Inauthentic Behaviour policy to make sure people understand what Facebook will enforce against, even if it is not a CIB campaign. This enforcement may include temporary restrictions, warnings, down-ranking or removal. Detection technology helps us block millions of attempts to create fake accounts every day and detect millions more, often within minutes after creation. The CIB Report for May 2020 is available here, and data is shared with third-party independent researchers and partners across industry and government so they too can take action.

Facebook's approach to misinformation

The speakers from Facebook explained that the company approach to misinformation is guided by the principle of providing high quality content, while balancing free expression. The strategy to combat misinformation has three parts: **remove, reduce, inform**. None of this is something one company can take on alone, and partnerships are a huge part of this work:

1. **Remove** content that violates our community guidelines, such as misinformation that can lead to physical harm;
2. **Reduce** content that does not violate our community standards but has been rated false by one of our independent third party fact checking partners; ;
3. **Inform**, for example via collaboration with fact-checkers and or by alerting users when they have been exposed to or interacted with misleading content. Promoting media literacy and helping foster critical thinking about content is part of this work.

A democratic, evidence-based framework

Panelists agreed that a constructive, democratic debate on misinformation that goes beyond the perspectives of platforms or regulators and takes an evidence-based approach will be needed to fully handle the problem. To this end, existing partnerships should be expanded. To reestablish trust, work to clarify definitions, expectations and the rules in terms of accountability must happen. One panelist suggested that binding rules for social media companies is one option, but balance should be struck between access to accurate information, independent and professional media and platform accountability.

Several panelists mentioned that deeper understanding of the problem and an analysis of media consumption and citizens' trust in media are needed, which require access to data. They urged Facebook to consider further expanding collaboration with

authorities and independent researchers on the topic of misinformation and disinformation, including providing more data on the state of misinformation on the platform, the actions taken and their impact.

Increasing citizens' resilience

Panellists agreed that an effective strategy to combat misinformation should go beyond content moderation to also include strategies to help citizens develop media literacy skills. One panellist mentioned that digital skills should be defined very broadly given their relevance to all types of societal problems. There is a need to create partnerships that offer citizens, young and old, the digital skills they need to participate in a digital society and economy.

What's next

There was consensus that the COVID-19 pandemic was an opportunity to test solutions. Misinformation tends to be more prevalent in times of crisis and change. In many cases, we can prepare for this in advance and put concrete actions into place to mitigate the issue. Examples include imposing a moratorium on virality during crises or informing people who have viewed misleading content.

Participants agreed that many open questions remained. For instance, how to tackle the increasingly transitory nature of misleading content and the shift towards private messages or groups? How to guarantee freedom of expression while ensuring access to accurate information? What would a guiding framework to combat misinformation look like? Arriving at sensible answers will require careful consideration and active inputs by platforms, civil society and public authorities.

About Facebook EU Conversations

Facebook EU Conversations are focused multidisciplinary roundtables that gather experts on EU policy topics of relevance. The idea is anchored in our commitment to engage frankly and openly about complex subjects, and the simple belief that two heads are better than one.