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EDITORIAL

How the EU Counters Disinformation: Journalistic and Regulatory Responses

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Abstract

Social media companies have strengthened their power—both discursive and political—during the last decade, a process that has disrupted the public spheres, contributing to shaping the way in which public discourse unfolds. In this process, it has empowered anti-democratic domestic and foreign actors, and challenged the business model of traditional media companies, substantially changing journalistic practices. This process has led policy-makers across the world, but more specifically in the EU, to conceive of disinformation as a "problem" (sometimes even a "threat to democracy") that needs to be "solved." The thematic issue critically contributes to the increasing literature on the topic by opening avenues that reorient the debate towards the relationship between Big Tech regulation, disinformation, journalism, politics, and democracy in the EU context.

Keywords

1. How Disinformation Has Become a Key Political Issue in the EU

Social media companies have strengthened their power—both discursive and political—during the last decade, a process that has disrupted the public spheres, contributing to shaping the way in which public discourse unfolds. In this process, social media has empowered anti-democratic domestic and foreign actors, and challenged the business model of traditional media companies, substantially changing journalistic

practices. Furthermore, it has also substantially affected processes of consensus-seeking in democracies (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). This has led policy-makers across the world, but more specifically in the EU, to conceive of disinformation as a "problem" (sometimes even a "threat to democracy") that needs to be "solved." Critical junctures, such as the 2014 illegal Russian annexation of Crimea and the ensuing disinformation about it, the 2016 Trump election, the Brexit referendum, the Cambridge Analytica scandal, or Covid-19, have contributed to enhancing the salience of disinformation, as well as the increasing relevance of these social media platforms in articulating the public sphere. In fact, countering disinformation has become a key component of the EU's own conception of democracy (Oleart & Theuns, 2023).

Accordingly, the EU has undertaken multiple initiatives. In response to the Russian invasion of Crimea, in March 2015 the EU created the EastStratCom Task Force, with the objective of detecting and responding to disinformation campaigns (mainly by the Russian government) using strategic communication (Kachelmann & Reiners, 2023; Ördén, 2019). In 2018, the Commission developed a more comprehensive series of ad hoc initiatives and policy documents. This work was formalised with the adoption of a High-Level Group on fake news and disinformation, and a voluntary Code of Practice on disinformation, organised on the grounds that the EU should prepare itself in the run-up to the 2019 European Parliament elections. After the 2019 EU elections, the von der Leyen Commission developed the European Democracy Action Plan which provided the backbone for policies on disinformation until 2024, a process whose importance grew due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The most influential initiative against disinformation has taken place within the Digital Services Act (DSA), an approach characterised as "co-regulatory," which breaks away from the EU's previously dominant approach of self-regulation to digital platforms by trying to regulate with these platforms rather than simply leaving these platforms to set their own policies. There have already been critical analyses of the EU regulatory action on disinformation (see Bouza García & Oleart, 2024; Bouza et al., 2024; Casero-Ripollés et al., 2023), but much work still remains to be done in making sense of the relationship between EU tech policy, disinformation, and democracy.

The question of disinformation is likely to continue to grow, as in 2025 it remains a central political issue, especially after the 2024 US presidential election victory of Donald Trump, who counts Elon Musk (owner of X, formerly Twitter) as one of his main allies. In fact, the EU is beginning to question X as the playing field for the future configuration of the European public debate, as it is very close to an increasingly geopolitical rival such as the US Trump administration. This concern is further compounded by the platform's capacity to channel disinformation strategies aimed at a dual purpose: (a) to erode the democratic models of geopolitical competitors; and (b) to monetize disinformation more effectively and rapidly. Furthermore, the EU is perceived as lagging behind technological advancements in comparison to the US and China, a geopolitical dimension that is likely to continue to grow when regulating tech platforms and companies that are not "European." This is visible by the increasing emphasis of the EU on building "tech sovereignty," framing EU tech policy and disinformation as primarily a geopolitical issue. Illustratively, Henna Virkkunen was confirmed within the second von der Leyen Commission as EU Commissioner for Tech Sovereignty, Security & Democracy until 2029. Unfortunately, the geopolitical framing of tech policy by the EU often sidelines addressing the business model of most tech companies, rooted in "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff, 2019). Indeed, the support to European tech companies and a "EuroStack" (Bria et al., 2025) by the EU through private–public partnerships on the grounds of "competitiveness," "innovation," and "European strategic autonomy" will not fundamentally democratize technology and sideline disinformation if such approach does not entail a fundamental rethinking of the business model of tech companies or even the articulation of

public tech institutions. Perhaps the time has come for a European publicly owned and democratically governed version of X?

That said, not all action against disinformation has been regulatory, and there have been a myriad of initiatives to tackle it through innovative practices, such as fact-checking. This strategy to combat disinformation is straightforward: debunk the falsehoods that circulate in the public sphere. This strategy assumes that citizens, media, and political actors will prefer fact-based information over misleading narratives, and thus exposing true facts is a solution compatible with freedom of expression and liberal values. However, this assumption may clash with the very idea of post-truth politics: Does the election of Donald Trump for a second term and the usage of disinformation by tech oligarchs not confirm that we are living in a post-truth era, one where opposing narratives are impervious to verification? The effectiveness of fact-checking is therefore under dispute as part of a broader competition to define the best way to combat disinformation at the European level (Tuñón Navarro et al., 2019). Indeed, fact-checking, as part of a broader realignment of journalistic practices in order to respond to the challenge that disinformation poses, is being institutionalized as a new decisive stakeholder in the field as well (Tuñón et al., 2025).

The thematic issue critically contributes to these strands of literature by studying responses to disinformation in Europe by exploring regulatory and security responses and emerging journalistic practices—in particular fact-checking—and their complex interplay. Do media promote some practices over others according to dominant political discourses and emerging regulations? To what extent policies such as public diplomacy are enhanced or weakened by media literacy, fact-checking networks, or regulation of platforms? How do regulation and journalistic practices affect democratic performance? Overall, our thematic issue opens avenues that reorient the debate towards the relationship between Big Tech regulation, disinformation, journalism, politics, and democracy in the EU context. Furthermore, in terms of regulation, it will not only scrutinise and critique existing policy efforts but also imagine possible alternatives, a dimension that has received limited attention (Fuchs, 2021; Griffin, 2023; Muldoon, 2022).

2. European Policy Responses to Disinformation: Regulation, Political Communication, Fact-Checking, and Journalistic Initiatives

More concretely, the thematic issue covers two broad thematic blocks. First, the issue addresses the regulatory dimension of disinformation in the EU context, including the geopolitical turn of the EU and the tension between securitization and democracy when approaching disinformation. Ó Fathaigh et al. (2025) and Monaci and Persico (2025) address the EU's milestone regulation of digital services, the DSA. Both articles point out that despite the declared goal of fighting disinformation, the DSA does not have a proper definition of disinformation and its effect strongly depends upon complementary co-regulatory tools. The former article points out that the DSA may both limit freedom of expression in member states making disinformation illegal and also provide platforms a broad margin of appreciation regarding content removal, while the latter article highlights that the DSA has allowed platforms to adopt temporary measures of limited impact against disinformation entrepreneurs, rather than more effective actions such as deplatforming. Oleart and Rone (2025) take a broader view of EU regulatory responses by arguing that such actions have so far failed to address the root cause of the problem: the business model of social media companies. The article goes further in order to outline a set of priorities to imagine democratic alternatives to current social media and discuss what could be the EU's role in fostering them. Their main point is that combatting disinformation

is just one aspect of the broader task of democratizing technology and the public sphere. Proto et al. (2025), Durach et al. (2025), and Balčytienė et al. (2025) all explore responses to foreign campaigns and interference at the EU (Proto et al., 2025) and national level in Romania (Durach et al., 2025) and the Baltic countries (Balčytienė et al., 2025). The three articles point out that there have been processes of securitization of (dis)information that require a delicate balance between effective action to protect democracy without establishing state-sanctioned single narratives. The three articles address the evolution in policy responses—albeit, not always in the same direction—and potential trade-offs with other policy goals.

Second, the political communication, fact-checking, and journalism initiatives related to disinformation within the EU, including several national contexts. Another bunch of six articles explores the complexities of disinformation in Europe, offering critical insights into how media, public institutions, and democratic processes interact in an increasingly polarized and post-truth environment. A central theme running through these articles is the pivotal role of journalism and fact-checking in combating disinformation. Moland et al. (2025) argue for a reaffirmation of traditional journalistic values, highlighting public trust in unbiased news as a cornerstone for the future of journalism. This view aligns with García-Gordillo et al. (2025), who examine the role of EU-backed fact-checking initiatives in the EU. However, while Moland et al. (2025) emphasize adherence to traditional norms, García-Gordillo et al. (2025) point to the need for innovative strategies, including the integration of AI, to address the resource and technological gaps that hinder fact-checking efforts. Building on the theme of innovation, Cazzamatta's (2025) research highlights the importance of hyperlinking among European fact-checking organizations as a means to create transnational networks and strengthen collective responses to disinformation. Her findings reveal a stark contrast between the collaborative practices of independent organizations and the more insular approach of legacy media outlets.

This transnational perspective finds echoes in Rodríguez-Pérez et al. (2025) and Casero-Ripollés et al. (2025) analysis of Elections24Check, a European initiative that marked a shift from traditional fact-checking to debunking contextual disinformation during the 2024 European Parliament elections. Both articles underscore the value of cross-border cooperation, but Rodríguez-Pérez et al. (2025) also highlight the limitations of such initiatives, particularly their inability to focus sufficiently on election-specific disinformation. Casero-Ripollés et al. (2025) expand on these themes by examining the lifecycle of disinformation during electoral campaigns, revealing its persistence beyond polling day and its regional variations within Europe. Their findings emphasize how migration-related narratives, central to far-right agendas, dominate electoral disinformation. This focus on polarization and ideological exploitation ties closely to Haapala and Roch's (2025) exploration of how Spanish radical parties frame media elites in a post-truth context. Their study reveals the strategic use of media criticism by populist actors, both on the left and right, to legitimize their agendas and challenge democratic norms.

Taken together, these articles highlight both convergences and divergences in the fight against disinformation. While all agree on the urgency of transnational cooperation and the importance of fact-checking, they offer varied perspectives on the balance between tradition and innovation, national and regional dynamics, and reactive versus proactive approaches. This synthesis enriches our understanding of the European media landscape and provides actionable insights for policymakers, journalists, and academics seeking to protect democracy from disinformation.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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