Public consultation for legal entities on fake news and online disinformation

Fields marked with * are mandatory.

Public consultation for legal entities - "Fake news and online disinformation"

The phenomenon of fake news and online disinformation is a source of deep concern for its potential effects on the reputation of public institutions, the outcome of democratic deliberations or the citizens' opinion-forming on important public policies such as health, environment, immigration, security, economy or finance.

Although not new, this phenomenon is often said to be more pervasive and impactful today than ever before because of the ease with which news can be posted and shared by anyone on social media, the velocity at which such news may spread online, and the global reach they might effortlessly attain.

For the purposes of defining appropriate policy responses, a broad distinction can be drawn between false information that contain elements which are illegal under EU or national laws such as illegal hate speech, incitement to violence, terrorism or child abuse, and fake news that fall outside the scope of such laws. This consultation only addresses fake news and disinformation online when the content is not per se illegal and thus not covered by existing legislative and self-regulatory actions.

When tackling fake news, the public intervention must respect and balance different fundamental rights and principles, such as freedom of expression, media pluralism and the right of citizens to diverse and reliable information.

The purpose of the consultation is to collect views from all parties concerned across the EU as regards the scope of the problem and the effectiveness of voluntary measures already put in place by industry to prevent the spread of disinformation online and to better understand the rationale and possible directions for action at EU and/or national level.

This questionnaire specifically targets **legal entities and journalists**, **including independent/freelance journalists**. There is another questionnaire for citizens.

Your input will be used by the Commission to nourish policy discussions at EU level on the spread of disinformation online.

The consultation process will be complemented with a Eurobarometer public opinion survey to be launched early 2018 to measure and analyse the perceptions and concerns of European citizens around fake news.

Identification of respondents

* Please indicate your sector of activity

- ○ News media
- ○ Online platform
- ○ Fact-checking organisation
- ● Civil society organisation
- ○ Academia Educational sector
- ○ Public authority
- ○ Other

* Respondant's first name

100 character(s) maximum

Martin

* Respondant's last name

100 character(s) maximum

Schmalzried

* Organisation's name

100 character(s) maximum

COFACE-Families Europe

* Contact details

150 character(s) maximum

Rue de Londres 17,1050 Brussels, Belgium +32 2 500 56 90
mschmalzried@coface-eu.org

* Company/organisation website

100 character(s) maximum

http://www.coface-eu.org

* Legal seat of the organisation you represent

100 character(s) maximum

Belgium, Brussels

* Countries in which your organisation is active

- ☑ Austria
- ☑ Belgium
- ☑ Bulgaria
- ☑ Croatia
- ☑ Cyprus
- ☑ Czech Republic
- ☐ Denmark
- ☐ Estonia
- ☑ Finland
- ☑ France
- ☑ Germany
- ☑ Greece
- ☑ Hungary
- ☑ Ireland
- ☑ Italy
- ☐ Latvia
- ☐ Lithuania
- ☑ Luxembourg
- ☐ Malta
- ☑ Netherlands
- ☐ Poland
- ☐ Portugal
- ☐ Romania
- ☐ Slovak Republic
- ☐ Slovenia
- ☑ Spain
- ☐ Sweden
- ☐ United Kingdom
- ☐ Extra-EU
- ☐ All around the World

* Brief description of entity's sector(s) of activity

300 character(s) maximum

Civil society organization representing the interest of European Families and defending the general interest.

Number of employees

- ⦿ < 10
- ◯ 11-50
- ◯ 51-250
- ◯ > 250

Turnover of your organisation in 2016

- ⦿ < 2 million EUR
- ◯ 2-10 million EUR

○ 11-50 million EUR
○ > 50 million EUR

If part of a group of companies, please specify the identity of the group.

300 character(s) maximum

[ ]

*__*Is your organisation registered in the Transparency Register of the European Commission and the European Parliament?**

◉ Yes
○ No
○ Not applicable: I am replying as an individual in my personal capacity

*__*Please indicate your organisation's registration number in the Transparency Register.**

100 character(s) maximum

93283396780-85

For journalists: please briefly indicate the topics you cover

600 character(s) maximum

[ ]

For media companies: please provide a short overview of your online and off-line news and information services.

600 character(s) maximum

[ ]

For social media and online platforms: please provide a short overview of your core services. Please specify those enabling users to access news and information through your platform.

600 character(s) maximum

[ ]

For civil society organisations: please explain the corporate mission of your organisation and briefly describe its activities, including those designed to reduce disinformation.

600 character(s) maximum

COFACE Families Europe is a pluralistic network of civil society associations representing the interests of all families. COFACE's focus is essentially on policies and legislation that impact the lives of children and families, in particular in the fields of social protection and inclusion, safeguarding the rights of disabled and dependent persons, prevention and fighting child poverty, reconciling family and work life, migration, inclusive education and early childhood education and care, parenting support services to families, information and communications technologies, health and consumer.

For the <u>educational sector</u>: please clarify whether primary/secondary/higher, and indicate whether your institute teaches media literacy.

600 character(s) maximum

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For <u>academia</u>: please briefly describe your field of research and its relevance for a better understanding of the phenomenon of fake news.

600 character(s) maximum

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For <u>public authorities</u>: please briefly describe whether and how your organisation is involved in reducing the impact of disinformation.

600 character(s) maximum

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* Your contribution,

Note that, whatever option chosen, your answers may be subject to a request for public access to documents under Regulation (EC) N°1049/2001

- ⦿ **can be directly published with your personal information** (I consent to publication of all information in my contribution in whole or in part including, where applicable, my name/the name of my organisation, and I declare that nothing within my response is unlawful or would infringe the rights of any third party in a manner that would prevent publication)

- ○ **can be directly published provided that I/my organisation remain(s) anonymous** (I consent to publication of any information in my contribution in whole or in part (which may include quotes or opinions I express) provided that this is done anonymously. I declare that nothing within my response is unlawful or would infringe the rights of any third party in a manner that would prevent publication).

Scoping the problem

"Fake news" represents an ill-defined concept encompassing different types of disinformation, such as misrepresentation of reality or distortion of facts. In the context of this questionnaire, the focus is on **news that is intentionally created and spread online to mislead the reader** (e.g. for political or economic reasons). Generally, individual opinions, satire and pure journalistic errors are not considered as fake news. While the spread of certain fake news may constitute an illegal conduct under EU and/or national laws (e.g. as illegal hate speech, incitement to violence, terrorism or child abuse defamation, libel, etc.), in many other cases fake news may have harmful effects on society without being necessarily illegal. The following sub-set of questions is aimed at enabling the Commission to scope the problem and assess the mechanisms that may contribute to the spread of fake news which are not deemed illegal.

1. In your opinion, which criteria should be used to define fake news for the purposes of scoping the problem?

2000 character(s) maximum

There are no objective and specific criteria which would allow to clearly identify "fake news" from other news. The "cut off" point would always be arbitrary to a certain degree. Apart from the obvious blatant total fabrication, there are many shades and nuances between a detailed academic work of political science and an article in a regular newspaper. Is the omission of certain facts or the focus on some facts but not others a case for fake news? What if the fake news originates from "trusted" sources? For instance, the United States clearly lied about the Irak weapons of mass destruction, yet nearly all mainstream newspapers reported the event as if it were true. The same was true for the 1990-1991 Gulf War where the daughter of the Ambassador of Koweit testified in front of Congress that the Iraki soldiers killed babies in a Koweit hospital, which created the necessary public outrage to support a military intervention.

The only criteria that should be used for scoping the issue of "fake news" is to assess the diversity of news sources that online users are exposed to. An artificial intelligence or a sorting algorithm should ensure that users get a randomly diversified set of news stories from different points of view on the same news story. For instance, one progressive newspaper and one conservative newspaper.

2. Are the following categories of fake news likely to cause harm to society? Please answer on a scale from 1 to 4: 1 (no harm), 2 (not likely), 3 (likely) to 4 (highly likely).

	No opinion	1	2	3	4
Intentional disinformation aimed at influencing voting decisions at elections	◉	○	○	○	○
Intentional disinformation aimed at influencing health policies	◉	○	○	○	○
Intentional disinformation aimed at influencing environmental policies	◉	○	○	○	○
Intentional disinformation aimed at influencing immigration policies	◉	○	○	○	○
Intentional disinformation aimed at influencing economy or finance	◉	○	○	○	○
Intentional disinformation aimed at undermining trust in public institutions	◉	○	○	○	○
Intentional disinformation aimed at undermining public security	◉	○	○	○	○
Intentional disinformation aimed at generating advertisement revenues	◉	○	○	○	○
Other categories of intentional disinformation	◉	○	○	○	○

3. If you have remarks on these categories, please explain why and/or suggest additional categories of fake news.

300 character(s) maximum

All of them are harmful but that is besides the point. Neuroscience confirms that hearing a similar message over and over tricks the brain into believing it is true regardless of fact. The key here, is cultivating media diversity.

4. In your opinion, what are the main economic, social and technology-related factors which, in the current news media landscape, contribute to the increasing spread of fake news? For instance, you can address reading behaviour, advertising revenues, the changing role of journalists and/or the impact of sponsored articles.

3000 character(s) maximum

While advertising revenue and new online business models may be at fault, it is important to understand why fake news are suddenly becoming more "believable".

Policy makers tend to spend too little time wondering why so many people fall prey to "fake news" and why the phenomenon of "fake news" peaks at certain key moments throughout history. Instead of focusing on the symptom, we should be treating the root cause. What has happened in the last few decades that could justify the gradual and intensified emergence of fake news?

To find out, we should re-examine one of the most important reasons for the onset of revolutions as identified by the Ancient Greek Philosopher, Aristotle, from his seminal work "Politics".

In the general causes, we find, unsurprisingly, poverty or rather, the growing inequalities between a very few rich individuals at the top and a mass of poor people at the bottom. But it is not just about poverty, it is also about feelings of exclusion and humiliation. So very often, those who rebel seek to regain some property but also, to regain a sense of honor and self-worth. Also part of the general causes, Aristotle found that "[a] revolutionary climate would be soon created, especially when the state officials become haughty, arrogant and drunk with power, or pay no attention to the genuine problems of the people."

Aristotle found these factors to be at the root cause of revolutions, but they are also at the root cause of "fake news", almost as a symptomatic forewarning.

More and more countries around the world are experiencing the factors identified by Aristotle bringing about revolutions. It is no mystery that inequalities between the rich and the poor have been growing, exacerbated by the 2008 financial crisis. But that is not all. Many people also experience a feeling of exclusion and humiliation. People that formerly had a certain social status, had self-worth, as qualified workers in the American automotive sector for instance now unemployed due to delocalizations, are now in a state of humiliation. The mass media even sometimes exacerbating this sentiment: as we have seen in the Trump election or the Brexit, mass media continuously expressed contempt or arrogance when talking about the "uneducated, dumb electors", falling prey to populist speeches from people like Donald Trump or Nigel Farage.

If we examine fake news closely, we find recurring themes which simply put, blame the misery of fake news readers on some external factors like immigration, liberal elites, Jews, Muslims, terrorism etc, and suggesting an "easy fix" for these: kick out the immigrants, kick out the "establishment",…

5. In which media do you most commonly come across fake news? Select the most relevant options.
- ☐ Traditional print newspapers and news magazines
- ☑ Traditional online newspapers and news magazines
- ☑ Online-only newspapers
- ☐ News agencies (e.g. Reuters, ANSA, AFP)
- ☑ Social media and messaging apps

☑ Online blogs/forums
☐ TV
☐ Radio
☐ News aggregators (e.g. Google News, Apple news, Yahoo news)
☑ Video sharing platforms (e.g. YouTube, DailyMotion, Vimeo)
☑ Information shared by friends or family
☐ No opinion

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.

☑ Online sharing by human influencers / opinion makers
☑ Online sharing done by bots (automated social media accounts)
☑ Sharing among social media users
☑ Recommendation algorithms used on online platforms
☑ Media editorial decisions
☐ Others

7. Which of the following areas have, in your view, been <u>targeted</u> by fake news during the last two years? Please, for each area, use a scale from 1 to 4; 1 (not targeted), 2 (marginally targeted), 3 (moderately targeted), 4 (heavily targeted).

	No opinion	1	2	3	4
Political affairs (e.g. elections)	◉	○	○	○	○
Security	◉	○	○	○	○
Personal life of public figures (e.g. politicians)	◉	○	○	○	○
Show biz and entertainment	◉	○	○	○	○
Immigration (e.g. refugees)	◉	○	○	○	○
Minorities (e.g. religious, ethnic, sexual orientation)	◉	○	○	○	○
Health (e.g. vaccines)	◉	○	○	○	○
Environment (e.g. climate change)	◉	○	○	○	○
Economy and finance (e.g. market rumours)	◉	○	○	○	○
Science and technology (e.g. fake or misleading studies)	◉	○	○	○	○

8. In your view, has <u>public opinion been impacted</u> by fake news in the following areas during the last two years? Please for each area use a scale from 1 to 4: 1 (no impact), 2 (some impact), 3 (substantial impact) to 4 (strong impact).

	No opinion	1	2	3	4

Political affairs (e.g. elections)	◉	○	○	○	○
Security	◉	○	○	◉	○
Personal life of public figures (e.g. politicians)	◉	○	○	○	○
Show biz and entertainment	◉	○	○	○	○
Immigration (e.g. refugees)	◉	○	○	○	○
Minorities (e.g. religious, ethnic, sexual orientation)	◉	○	○	○	○
Health (e.g. vaccines)	◉	○	○	○	○
Environment (e.g. climate change)	◉	○	○	○	○
Economy and finance (e.g. market rumours)	◉	○	○	○	○
Science and technology (e.g. fake or misleading studies)	◉	○	○	○	○

9. If you are an online platform or a news organisation, please explain the criteria you use to rank news content on your platform/online website and a description of their impact on the ranking of other sources of news.

3000 character(s) maximum

Assessment of the measures already taken by online platforms, news media organisations and civil society organisations to counter the spread of disinformation online

Concrete steps have been taken by online platforms, news media organisations and civil society organisations (e.g. fact checkers) to counter the spread of disinformation online. For instance measures have been taken to deprive fake news websites of online advertising revenue, to close fake accounts, and to establish flagging mechanisms (by readers and trusted-flagger organisations alerting the platforms about content of dubious veracity) and collaborations with independent fact-checkers adhering to the International Fact-Checking code of principles.
The following subset of questions is aimed at collecting information needed to better identify the positive impact, and the drawbacks, of current measures to counter the spread of disinformation online.

10. To what extent, if at all, have the following measures reduced the spread of fake news? Please evaluate each of the following statements on a scale from 1 to 4; 1 (no contribution), 2 (minor contribution), 3 (appreciable contribution), 4 (great contribution).

	No opinion	1	2	3	4
Pop-up messages on social media, encouraging readers to check news and sources	○	○	◉	○	○

	No opinion	1	2	3	4
Mechanisms to display in prominent position information from different sources representing similar viewpoints (e.g. "related articles" button)	○	○	○	●	○
Mechanisms to display in prominent position information representing different viewpoints (e.g. "other sources say" button)	○	○	○	●	○
Mechanisms enabling readers to flag content that is misleading and/or fake	○	○	●	○	○
Warnings to readers that a post or article has been flagged /disputed	○	●	○	○	○
Fact-checking through independent news organisations and civil society organisations (explaining why a post may be misleading)	○	○	●	○	○
Mechanisms to block sponsored content from accounts that regularly post fake news	○	○	●	○	○
Closing of fake accounts and removal of automated social media accounts (based on the platforms' code of conduct)	○	○	●	○	○

For the measures you have rated equal or below 2 in the previous question please specify why, in your opinion, they are not so effective

600 character(s) maximum

> Because they do not address the root cause of why people spread fake news and are receptive to fake news in the first place. For an ideologically tainted audience, filtered or censored fake news outlets are seen as being victims of the "establishment", martyrs and victims of oppression and violating freedom of speech (the politically correct/corrupt elites,...)

11. If you are an online platform or a news organisation and you have adopted measures aimed at countering the spread of disinformation on your online platform, news media or website, or on those operated by third parties, please explain the measures you took. Please provide a short description of their characteristics as well as their results.

3000 character(s) maximum

12. If you are an online platform or a news organisation, which tools do you use to assess the content uploaded on your platform/the quality of online information used to produce news content? Please evaluate each of the following measures on a scale from 1 to 4; 1 (rarely), 2 (occasionally), 3 (often), 4 (always).

	No opinion	1	2	3	4
Fact checking (human fact checkers)	○	○	○	○	○
Peer reviews	○	○	○	○	○

Flagging (by users)	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
Flagging (by trusted flaggers)	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
Automated content verification tools	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
Other	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙

13. In your view, are readers sufficiently aware of the steps to take to verify veracity of news, when reading and sharing news online (e.g. check sources, compare sources, check whether claims are backed by facts)?

- ⊙ Yes
- ⦿ No
- ⊙ No opinion

You are welcome to provide a comment on readers' awareness on the precautions they should take when reading and sharing news online

600 character(s) maximum

> Education, critical thinking and media literacy in general are the most basic prerequisites. But more importantly, understanding and identifying the ideologically driven objectives of fake news is essential. However, this is easier said then done.

14. If you are an online platform or a news organisation, what does your organisation do in order to inform readers about the precautions they should take when reading and sharing news online (e. g. periodic notifications, media literacy programmes) ? How do you help them assess a specific article/post (tools to investigate the source, links to facts & figures, links to other sources etc.) ?

3000 character(s) maximum

Scope for possible future actions to improve access to reliable information and reduce the spread of disinformation online

It is sometimes argued that the mechanisms put in place so far by online platforms and news media organisations to counter the spread of fake news only capture a small fraction of disinformation, and that this involves labour-intensive human verification of content and does not prevent virality of fake news through social media. Moreover, concerns have been voiced about the risks of censorship and the need to ensure a more diversified and pluralistic ranking of alternative news sources on social media.
The following questions are aimed at collecting information on additional actions which may help to provide a comprehensive and effective response to the phenomenon of fake news.

15. Do you think that more should be done to reduce the spread of disinformation online?
- ⦿ Yes
- ⊙ No
- ⊙ No opinion

You are welcome to comment on what should be done to reduce the spread of disinformation online.
3000 character(s) maximum

> Yes, but in addressing the contextual and root causes rather then the symptoms directly. Addressing inequalities will already, in and of itself, remove part of the rationale for publishing fake news stories in the first place.

16. In your view, which measures could <u>online platforms</u> take in order to improve users' access to reliable information and prevent the spread of disinformation online?
3000 character(s) maximum

> Two main things: design algorithms which diversity the users' newsfeed and shift to business models which promote quality over quantity (mostly due to reliance on online advertising)

17. How effective would the following measures by online platforms be in preventing the spread of disinformation? Please evaluate each action on a scale from 1 to 4; 1 (no impact), 2 (low impact), 3 (moderate impact), 4 (strong impact).

	No opinion	1	2	3	4
Rank information from reliable sources higher and predominantly display it in search results or news feeds.	○	●	○	○	○
Provide greater remuneration to media organisations that produce reliable information online	○	●	○	○	○
Allow more control to users on how to personalise the display of content.	○	○	●	○	○
Allow direct flagging of suspicious content between social media users.	○	●	○	○	○
Invest in educating and empowering users for better assessing and using online information.	○	○	●	○	○
Provide buttons next to each article that allow users to investigate or compare sources.	○	○	○	●	○
Inform users when certain content was generated or spread by a bot rather than a human being.	○	○	●	○	○
Inform users about the criteria and/or algorithms used to display content to them (why they see certain content).	○	○	●	○	○
Support civil society organisations to improve monitoring and debunking of fake news.	○	○	●	○	○
Employ fact-checkers at the online platform.	○	●	○	○	○
Further limit advertisement revenues flowing to websites publishing fake news.	○	○	●	○	○

	No opinion	1	2	3	4
Improve and extend to all EU Member States online platforms' current practices, which label suspicious information after fact-checking.	○	●	○	○	○
Invest in technological solutions such as Artificial Intelligence to improve the discovery and tracking of fake news.	○	○	○	●	○
Develop new forms of cooperation with media outlets, fact-checkers and civil society organisations to implement new approaches to counter fake news.	○	○	●	○	○
Other	○	○	○	○	●

* Please specify other.

600 character(s) maximum

> An algorithm that shows a wide diversity of news sources covering the same topic, promoting various points of view.

18. In your view, which measures could <u>news media organisations</u> take in order to improve the reach of reliable information and prevent the spread of disinformation online?

3000 character(s) maximum

> Diversity their business models. Right now, the over-reliance on online advertising creates a perverse incentive to attract readers via sensationalist headlines. But new business models emerging such as cryptocurrency mining using a person's computer while he/she visits a website, could reward quality over quantity. Since the amount of cryptocurrency depends on the time spent on the website, providing quality content that takes time to read through will be just as profitable as writing a crappy clickbaiting type article with no content and a catchy title. The perverse effect of advertising is that once the user has opened the page, much of the "money" has been made! So all that is necessary is to attract the user, without focusing on the quality of content. The same applies to Youtube where users watch a pre-screening video, and then regardless of whether they watch the first 10 seconds or the full video, the money was made.

19. How effective would the following measures by <u>news media organisations</u> be in strengthening reliable information and tackling fake news? Please evaluate each actions on a scale from 1 to 4; 1 (no impact), 2 (low impact), 3 (moderate impact), 4 (strong impact).

	No opinion	1	2	3	4
Invest more in new forms of journalism (i.e. data-based investigative journalism) to offer reliable and attractive narratives.	○	○	○	●	○
Increase cooperation with other media organisations	○	○	○	●	○
Help readers develop media literacy skills to approach online news critically	○	○	○	●	○
Help readers assess information when and where they read it (e.g. links to sources)	○	○	○	●	○

	No opinion	1	2	3	4
Support civil society organisations and participative platforms (for instance using the model of Wikipedia/Wikinews) to improve monitoring and debunking of fake news.	○	○	○	●	○
Invest in technological solutions to strengthen their content verification capabilities, in particular for user-generated content, in order not to contribute to the proliferation of fake news.	○	○	○	●	○
Other	○	○	○	○	○

20. In you view, which measures could <u>civil society organisations</u> take in order to support reliable information and prevent the spread of disinformation online?

3000 character(s) maximum

> Help policy makers understand the root causes and making sure that any policy measure is proportionate to the problem and achieves the desired outcomes without backfiring.

21. How do you rate the added value of an independent observatory/website (linking platforms, news media organisations and fact-checking organisations) to track disinformation and emerging fake narratives, improve debunking and facilitate the exposure of different sources of information online? Please evaluate each of the following statements on a scale from 1 to 4; 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (agree), 4 (strongly agree). If you find it useful, you can voice suggestions for independence hereunder - e.g. academic supervision, community-based structures or a hybrid such as Wikipedia.

	No opinion	1	2	3	4
The public would benefit from an independent observatory that acts like a knowledge centre, gathering studies and providing general advice on how to tackle disinformation online.	○	○	●	○	○
The public would benefit from an independent observatory that looks at popular social media posts, asks fact-checkers to look at them, and provide warnings (to platforms, public authorities, etc.) that they need to be flagged.	○	○	●	○	○
The public would benefit from an independent observatory /website that looks at popular social media posts, researches the facts and develops counter-narratives when necessary.	○	○	●	○	○
The public would benefit from an independent observatory /website that does not look at posts, but instead helps to gather factual information (and possibly user ratings) for each source, to help create a factual snapshot of each source's activity and reputation	○	○	●	○	○
An observatory is not useful for the public	○	○	○	○	○

22. What actions, if any, should be taken by public authorities to counter the spread of fake news, and at what level (global, EU, national/regional) should such actions be taken?

3000 character(s) maximum

> See above.

23. Please provide any comment and/or link to research that you consider useful to bring to the Commission attention.

3000 character(s) maximum

Contact

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