

Unpacking the Framing of *Information* and *Democracy* in EU Institutional Discourses on Disinformation Mitigation

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Context: disinformation mitigation in EU (1)

- In recent years, the European institutions have developed a series of initiatives to "tackle disinformation", presented as a threat to our democracies (Navarro et al., 2019; Olear & Theuns, 2023; Stasi & Parcu, 2021; Zajączkowski et al., 2023).
- Emergence of the problem of disinformation: Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, election of Trump in 2016, Brexit referendum, Cambridge Analytica scandal, Covid-19 pandemic (Olear & Theuns, 2023).
- UE's response to disinformation :
 - **2015:** the European Union set up a task force to detect and respond to disinformation campaigns from outside using strategic communication (Zajączkowski et al., 2023).
 - **2018:**
 - the Commission fully addresses the issue, by publishing, after public consultation and the establishment of an expert group, a Communication presenting the European approach to "tackle online disinformation" (European Commission, 2018/236),
 - Action Plan against Disinformation (2018/36) in anticipation of the European and national elections taking place in 2019 (Zajączkowski et al., 2023).

Context: disinformation mitigation in EU (2)



Belgium-Luxembourg
Digital Media and
Disinformation Observatory

- **The following years:** various Communications **on the defence of democracy**, highlighting the challenges of disinformation for democracies:
 - 2020: European Democracy Action Plan
 - 2023: Communication on the defence of democracy
 - 2025: European Shield for Democracy
- Emergence of multiple public policies relating to the fight against disinformation with a multiple and integrative response to disinformation (Zajączkowski et al., 2023):
 - defensive approach in the face of an external threat;
 - collaboration between civil society actors
 - Support of fact-checking and a functioning media ecosystem
 - Strengthening the critical capacity of citizens through media literacy (Tuñón et al., 2025).
 - (self-)regulatory approach, in particular regarding the role and power of platforms.

→ One of the EU initiatives led to the creation of the **European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO)**



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United Against Disinformation

Welcome to EDMO, the EU's largest interdisciplinary network to **counter disinformation.**

Elections

Elections

Research

Platform Datasets

Challenges, Insights, and Examples for Researchers under
Article 40 of the Digital Services Act

New Resource for Researchers

Platform Datasets: Challenges, Insights,
and Examples >

Ukraine

% of related disinformation on total detected disinformation, by topic

COVID-19
European Union
Israel - Hamas conflict
LGBTQ+
Ukraine
Climate change



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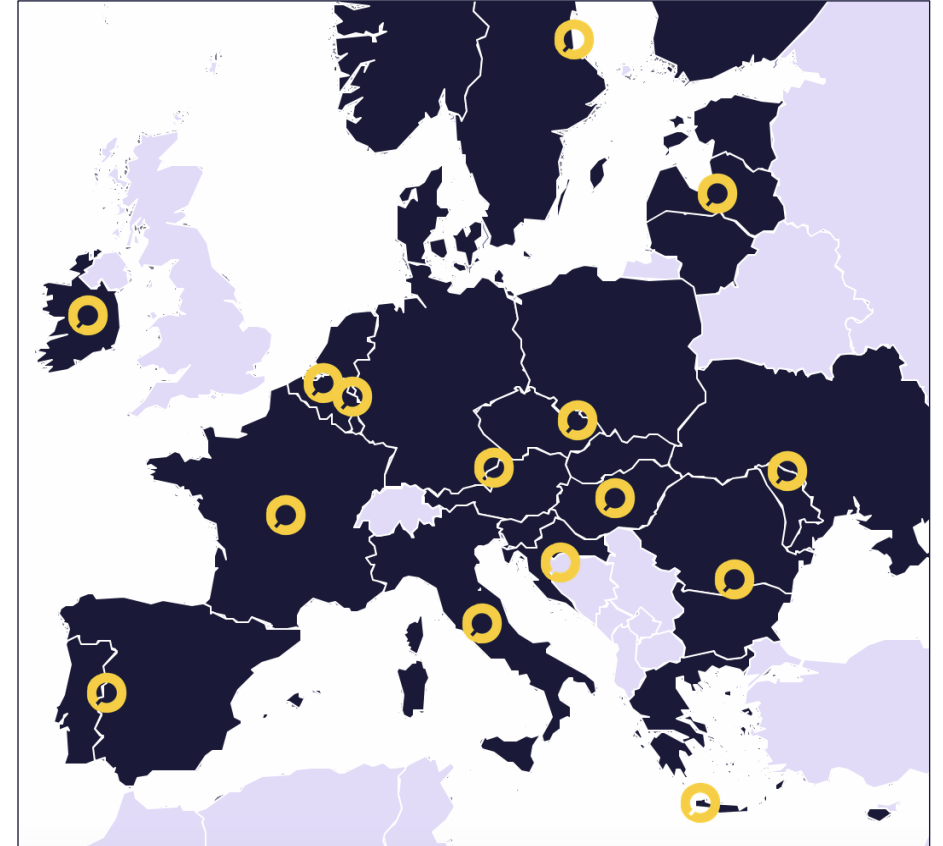
EDMO hubs

EDMO network = **15 national or multinational hubs** covering all 27 EU Member States as well as Moldova, Norway and Ukraine.

Each hub contributes to:

- **Detecting and analysing** disinformation campaigns, as well as **producing** content to support mainstream and local media and public authorities in exposing harmful disinformation campaigns;
- Organising **media literacy** activities at national or multinational level;
- Providing **support to national authorities** for the monitoring of online platforms' policies and the digital media ecosystem.

The EDMO hubs are **independent** from any national or EU public authority.



EDMO BELUX

Detecting, fact-checking
and investigating harmful
disinformation (Lead: AFP)



Conducting and supporting tailor-made
media literacy initiatives (Lead: MA)



Researching the impact of
disinformation and platform
policies on society (Lead:
EUDL)



Fostering the growth and the capacity of the BELUX multidisciplinary community
to tackle disinformation (Lead: UCLouvain)



Communication (Lead: VUB)



Project management (Lead: VUB)



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State of the art (1)

Disinformation and post-truth

- Current **debates about "post-truth", "fake news" and "disinformation"**: context of democratic backsliding, rise of populism, and social transformations, particularly in relation to the evolution of (uses of) technological tools.
- Emerging field of **disinformation studies** and **multidisciplinary literature**:
 - Seeking to **understand the concrete effects** on individuals and groups, or to find solutions to reduce their potential risk.
 - **Critical perspectives** relativizing the scope of the phenomenon or reflecting on the very construction of the object (ex: Altay et al 2023; Liccina 2025).
 - **Discourses** on "fake news" and post-truth:
 - construct a specific reading of democratic functioning and the role of truth in democracy,
 - a normative conception of democracy based on a liberal and consensual model, restricting other legitimate forms of democracy (Farkas & Schou 2023).

State of the art (2)

European Union's discourses and policies

- The construction of European discourses on disinformation and/or democracy, and the actors who contribute to these discourses (Oleart & García, 2025) ;
- European discourse as a "bricolage" (Kauppi 2022) at the crossroads of different influences (García-Gutián et al., 2024), in the continuity of previous discourses (Sampugnaro & Trenz, 2024).
- Conception(s) of democracy and the public sphere (Bouza García & Oleart, 2024; García-Gutián et al., 2024; Oleart & Theuns, 2023):
 - An idealistic representation of a Habermasian public space (Liccia, 2025)
 - A technocratic and legalistic conception of democratic functioning, reducing the importance of the role of democratic pluralism in the public sphere (Oleart & Theuns, 2023).
 - A framing of democracy around issues of the rule of law, "the quality of information" and "media freedom" (Oleart & Theuns, 2023).



Problematisation

- "Disinformation mitigation" is built on a certain idea of what "information" is, in particular in its role in democracy.
- The construction of a problem participates in the construction of its solution (Gusfield, 1984 ; Cefaï, 1996 ; Widmer, 2010 ; Arquembourg, 2016).

→ How is the notion of information constructed and how is it articulated with democracy in European discourses on disinformation mitigation?



Methodology

Critical discourse studies (Zienkowski & Patriarche, 2023) on the use of the notion of information, particularly in its relationship to democracy, in a selection of key documents related to the disinformation mitigation at the European level:

Document	Occurrences « information »	References
COMMUNICATION DE LA COMMISSION AU PARLEMENT EUROPÉEN, AU CONSEIL, AU COMITÉ ÉCONOMIQUE ET SOCIAL EUROPÉEN ET AU COMITÉ DES RÉGIONS. Lutter contre la désinformation en ligne: une approche européenne (COM/2018/236 final)	72	2018A
COMMUNICATION CONJOINTE AU PARLEMENT EUROPÉEN, AU CONSEIL EUROPÉEN, AU CONSEIL, AU COMITÉ ÉCONOMIQUE ET SOCIAL EUROPÉEN ET AU COMITÉ DES RÉGIONS. Plan d'action contre la désinformation (JOIN/2018/36 final)	19	2018B
COMMUNICATION DE LA COMMISSION AU PARLEMENT EUROPÉEN, AU CONSEIL, AU COMITÉ ÉCONOMIQUE ET SOCIAL EUROPÉEN ET AU COMITÉ DES RÉGIONS relative au plan d'action pour la démocratie européenne (COM(2020) 790 final)	40	2020
COMMUNICATION DE LA COMMISSION AU PARLEMENT EUROPÉEN, AU CONSEIL, AU COMITÉ ÉCONOMIQUE ET SOCIAL EUROPÉEN ET AU COMITÉ DES RÉGIONS relative à la défense de la démocratie (COM(2023) 630 final) (+ annexes)	56 (+86)	2023a (2023b)
COMMUNICATION CONJOINTE AU PARLEMENT EUROPÉEN, AU CONSEIL, AU COMITÉ ÉCONOMIQUE ET SOCIAL EUROPÉEN ET AU COMITÉ DES RÉGIONS. Bouclier européen de la démocratie: renforcer la position de démocraties fortes et résilientes (JOIN(2025) 791 final)	96	2025
TOTAL	369	



Corpus: Language selection

French excerpt	English Excerpt
« L'internet a non seulement considérablement accru le volume et la diversité des informations disponibles, mais il a également modifié en profondeur la manière dont les citoyens accèdent à l'information et s'investissent par rapport à cette dernière. Les jeunes utilisateurs, en particulier, utilisent désormais les médias en ligne comme principale source d'information. L'accès aisé à des informations diversifiées de qualité peut rendre les processus démocratiques plus participatifs et inclusifs. » (COM(2018) 236 final)	“Today, the Internet has not only vastly increased the volume and variety of news available to citizens but has also profoundly changed the ways citizens access and engage with news. Younger users, in particular, now turn to online media as their main source of information. The easy availability of diverse quality information has the potential to make democratic processes more participatory and inclusive”. (COM(2018) 236 final)
« En fournissant des informations fiables au public, les médias indépendants jouent un rôle important dans la lutte contre la désinformation et la manipulation du débat démocratique. » (COM(2020) 790 final)	“By providing the public with reliable information, independent media play an important role in the fight against disinformation and the manipulation of democratic debate.” (COM(2020) 790 final)

Preliminary results: information (1)

- « Information » as a **vague** and **polysemous** notion
 - No definition, as if self-explained
 - Multiple meanings and uses
 - Stabilised expressions (e.g. “information manipulation and foreign interference”)
- Information as a mirror of disinformation (or vice-versa?)

« On entend par désinformation, **les informations dont on peut vérifier qu’elles sont fausses ou trompeuses**, qui sont créées, présentées et diffusées dans un but lucratif ou dans l’intention délibérée de tromper le public et qui sont susceptibles de causer un préjudice public. » (2018A, p.4)

« l’exposition des citoyens à la désinformation à grande échelle, **y compris à des informations trompeuses ou absolument fausses**, constitue un défi majeur pour l’Europe » (2018A, p.1)

Preliminary results: information (2)

- Information, **truth** and the relation to **reality**
 - Information as true or false
 - Information as neither true nor false (misleading, partisan)
 - The relation to information (trust, reliable, verifiable)
 - Solutions : improving production or reception capacities
- **Value** and hierarchisation of information
- Information as an **ecosystem**
- Information as **media and journalistic production**

Preliminary results: information (3)

Transformations around “information”

- The digital transformation is considered as a pivotal moment that impacts the production, dissemination, circulation and access to information
- A few Positive aspects...
- ...But mostly negatives aspects
 - For traditional media
 - For citizens
- Identification of a risk for the integrity and quality of information
- A series of measures are put in place to maintain or strengthen the quality of information.
 - defending and supporting the media and journalism,
 - digital ecosystems" that "favor quality information".

→ Information is conceived mainly as a product of journalism and traditional media. This is this ecosystem that should be strengthened and protected because of its importance in democracy



Preliminary results: information and democracy

- We are in democracy
- A predominant model of what is a democracy
- Democracy needs informed citizens
- Democracy is threatened by information
- Democracy must protect information
- Democracy must defend itself with information

« Pour que leur **participation** soit pertinente, les citoyens doivent aussi être en mesure de **se forger leur propre opinion** – ils devraient pouvoir faire des **choix électoraux** dans un espace public où la **pluralité des points de vue** peut s'exprimer **librement** et où des médias libres, le monde universitaire et la société civile peuvent jouer leur rôle en stimulant un **débat ouvert, exempt d'ingérences** malveillantes, qu'elles soient nationales ou venues de l'extérieur. La démocratie ne peut s'épanouir que dans un climat dans lequel la **liberté d'information** et la **liberté d'expression** sont toutes deux respectées, conformément à la **charte des droits fondamentaux**, ce qui permet à chacun d'**exprimer son opinion**, aussi **critique** soit-elle à l'égard des gouvernements et des dirigeants. » (2020, p.2)

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The informed citizen

« Des **citoyens** engagés, **informés** et dotés de moyens d’agir sont la meilleure garantie de résilience de nos démocraties. » (2020, p.4)

« La désinformation mine la confiance dans les institutions et dans les médias traditionnels et numériques, et elle nuit à nos démocraties en entravant la capacité des citoyens à **prendre des décisions informées**. » (2018A, p.2)

« L’**accès** aisé à **des informations diversifiées de qualité** peut rendre les processus démocratiques **plus participatifs** et inclusifs » (2018A, p.2)

Preliminary results: information and democracy

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Discussions (1)

- Protecting a democratic EU
- Liberal democracy (Habermas, 2003), representative and electoral, as the privileged democratic model
- A vague and restrictive reading of information, whose ecosystem must be protected from transformation because it is seen as essential in a democracy
- A linear and technodeterminist understanding on the relation between information and democracy
- What about *democratisation of information* ?

Discussions (2)

- "Information" in "the tackling of disinformation": a notion caught in a "metapolitical" struggle (Zienkowski, 2019)(Zienkowski, 2019)

« Metapolitics [...] differs from politics as usual in the sense that it consists of practices that potentially reconfigure existing mode of politics, the associated logics and rationalities, as well as the dominant power structures in a given public sphere. Metapolitical debates have the potential to reshape the structure of a public realm, the entities and processes that constitute it, as well as the concepts and practices of politics that underpin it. » (Zienkowski, 2019, p.132)

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