

Protecting the “informed citizen” against disinformation to defend democracy

Reflecting on the discourses shaping EU disinformation mitigation policies

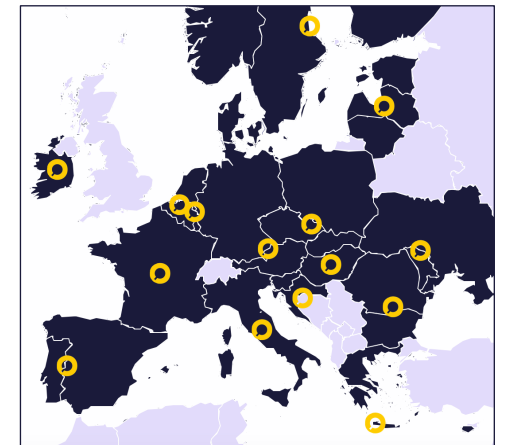
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Disinformation mitigation in the EU

- **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 (Oleart & Theuns, 2023).
- The European institutions have developed **a series of initiatives to "tackle disinformation"**, presented as a threat to our democracies (Navarro et al., 2019; Oleart & Theuns, 2023; Stasi & Parcu, 2021; Zajączkowski et al., 2023).
- **Multiple public policies relating to the fight against disinformation** with a multiple and integrative response to disinformation (Zajączkowski et al., 2023), including **EDMO**.



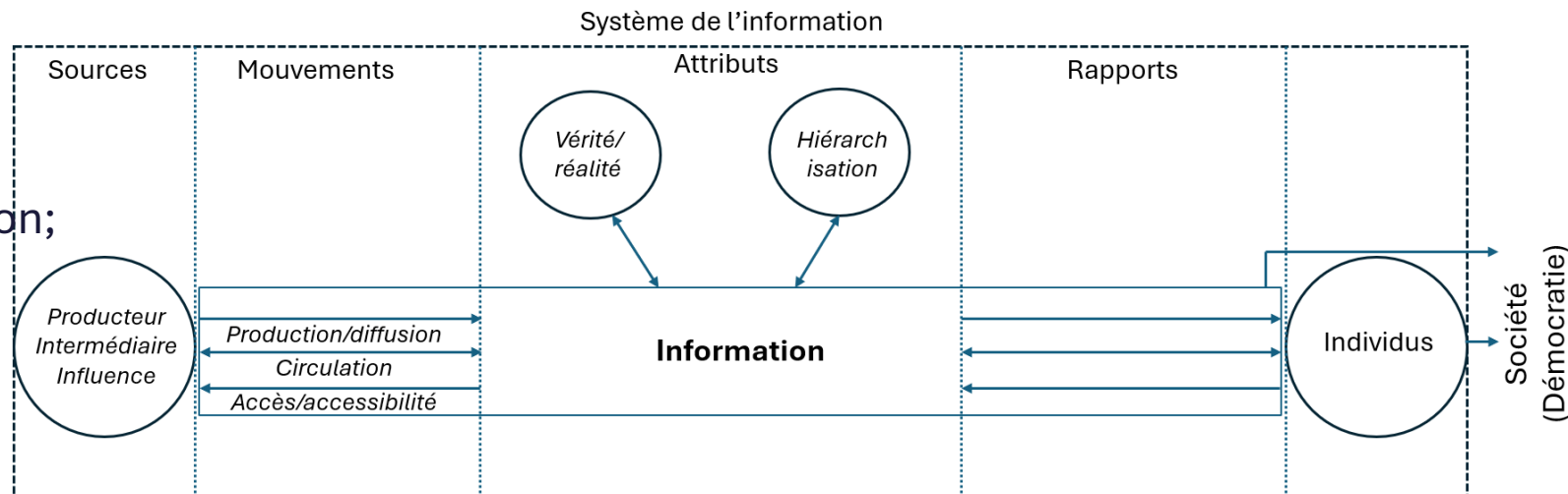
The disinformation problem in EU institutional discourse

- “Disinformation mitigation” is built on a certain idea of **what “information”** is, especially its **role in democracy**
- Restricted conception(s) of democracy and the public sphere (e.g. Bouza García & Oleart, 2024; García-Gutián et al., 2024).
- The construction of a problem shapes the construction of its solution (Gusfield, 1984 ; Cefai, 1996).
- An ideal-typical vision of information and its role in democracy (Derinöz & Patriarche, 2026 (TBP); Dolan 2026).



Five articulations of information (Derinöz & Patriarche 2026, TBP)

- **Attributes:** Information is often qualified in its articulation with truth and as well as in its ability to be hierarchical.
- **Sources:** regularly linked to the quality of the information produced or provided, its reliability or accuracy. It is mostly provided by (traditional) media.
- **Movements:** access to information, liberty of information.
- **System:** media as central element of the system.
- **Relations with society (democracy):**
 - the EU is democratic;
 - European democracy is liberal;
 - information is vital for democracy;
 - information threatens democracy;
 - democracy must protect information;
 - information protects democracy.



The (well-)informed citizen as a central figure

« Our open democratic societies depend on public debates that allow **well-informed citizens** to express their will through free and fair political processes. Media have traditionally played a key role in holding public authorities to account and in **providing the information that enables citizens to form their own views on societal issues and actively and effectively participate in democratic society.**

(...)

Disinformation erodes trust in institutions and in digital and traditional media, and harms our democracies **by hampering the ability of citizens to take informed decisions.** »

(COM(2018) 236 final, p.1)



The (well-)informed citizen in question (1)

« [...] The policy discourse also rests upon an implicit empirical and normative assumptions. **Empirically**, that it is possible to manipulate the information environment in ways that materially threaten democratic outcomes; and **normatively**, that democratic legitimacy relies on informed citizens making reasoned political choices » (Dolan 2026).

- Lippmann (1922) VS Dewey (1927) (Dolan 2026)
- The well-informed citizen (Schütz 1976)
- Individual process VS collective process (Schudson 1998)

The (well-)informed citizen in question (2)

- **Not well-informed** citizens... (Delli and Keeter 1996)
- ...but **not uninformed** (Delli Carpini 2000, Dolan 2026, Popkin 1991)
- Political preferences not influenced by a single piece of (mis)information

→ Towards a better understanding of **the articulation between information and democracy**:

- How do people **get informed** ?
- How do people translate information **into political action** ?

→ Audience turn of journalism studies (Swart et al. 2022), public connection(e.g.: Moe and Ytre-Arne 2022) and political knowledge (e.g.: Alves 2023)

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