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THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE
REGIONS on the implementation of the Communication "Tackling online
disinformation: a European Approach"

Delegations will find attached document COM(2018) 794 final.

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EUROPEAN
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REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION

**TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL, THE
COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE
COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

on the implementation of the Communication

"Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach"

1. INTRODUCTION

On 26 April 2018, the Commission adopted its Communication on “*Tackling Online Disinformation: a European Approach*” (Communication)¹. The Communication delineates the challenges online disinformation present to our democracies and outlines five clusters of actions for private and public stakeholders that respond to these challenges.

This Report accompanies the Joint Communication “Action Plan against Disinformation”². It sets out the Commission’s assessment of the progress made in the implementation of the actions set out in the April Communication.

2. STATUS OF ACTIONS

2.1 A more transparent, trustworthy and accountable online ecosystem

2.1.1 Online platforms to act swiftly and effectively to protect users from disinformation

The first set of actions aims at creating a more transparent, trustworthy and accountable online ecosystem. The outlined actions include the development of a self-regulatory code of practice on disinformation for online platforms and the advertising industry in order to increase transparency and better protect users; the creation of an independent European network of fact-checkers to establish common working methods, exchange best practices and achieve the broadest possible coverage across the EU; the promotion of voluntary online identification systems to improve the traceability and identification of suppliers of information; and the use of the EU research and innovation programme (Horizon 2020) to mobilise new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, block chain and cognitive algorithms.

In May 2018 the Commission convened the Multistakeholder Forum on Disinformation (Forum) to draft a self-regulatory Code of Practice on Disinformation (Code)³. The Forum consisted of a “Working Group” composed of the major online platforms, and representatives of the advertising industry and major advertisers, as well as a “Sounding Board” composed of representatives of the media, academia and civil society. The Working Group was tasked with drafting the Code, and the Sounding Board was tasked with providing advice and issuing an Opinion on the Code. The Code was published on 26 September, along with the Opinion of the Sounding Board⁴.

The Code comprises a Preamble, a statement of Purposes, and a set of 15 Commitments prefaced by explanatory comments that reference the Communication's objectives, detail the commitments' scope and purposes, and provide context. The commitments are organised under five fields:

1. Scrutiny of ad placements
2. Political advertising and issue-based advertising
3. Integrity of services
4. Empowering consumers
5. Empowering the research community

Signatories to the Code are required to identify which of these commitments they will adhere to, in light of their relevance to the products or services they provide. The Code includes, as an integral

¹ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach, 26.4.2018, COM (2018) 236 final, available at: http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/document.cfm?doc_id=51804.

² JOIN(2018) 36.

³ <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/meeting-multistakeholder-forum-disinformation>.

⁴ <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/code-practice-disinformation>.

part, annexes that identify the specific policies and actions signatories will pursue to implement the Code.

The Code establishes additional commitments requiring signatories to report on and assess the Code's implementation, functioning and effectiveness, based on annual self-assessment reports that will be reviewed by an objective Third-Party Organisation selected by the signatories. The signatories also commit to cooperating with Commission in assessing the Code, including providing information upon request and responding to questions.

On 16 October, the Code's initial signatories provided their formal subscriptions to the Code identifying the commitments each signatory will adhere to and a table listing relevant company best practices as well as milestones for the overall implementation of the Code in the EU⁵. The initial signatories are: Facebook, Google, Twitter and Mozilla as well as the trade association representing online platforms (EDIMA) and trade associations representing the advertising industry and advertisers (EACA, IAB Europe, WFA and UBA)⁶.

In addition, Facebook, Google, Twitter and Mozilla have outlined a number of specific activities they will carry out with a view to, and in advance of, the European elections of spring 2019, focusing on the security and integrity of elections.

The Commission considers that the Code provides an appropriate framework for pursuing the objectives for the Code set out in the Communication. It also considers that the Code is consistent with the Commission's Principles for Better Self-and Co-Regulation. Its initial signatories represent a large share of the online news distribution sector.

The Commission emphasises that the Code's completion should be viewed as a first step. Signatories must now work to ensure the robust implementation, scale-up and enforcement of policies and actions they have identified. The Commission takes the view that its implementation should be carried out on a full, effective and timely basis.

The Commission will ask the signatories for up-to-date information about measures taken towards the implementation of the Code by the end of 2018. The Commission intends to publish this information in January 2019.

Moreover, between January and May 2019, the Commission will carry out a targeted monitoring of the Code to verify that effective policies with particular pertinence to the integrity of the electoral processes are in place before the European elections, more specifically compliance with key parameters in the Code (scrutiny of ad placement, transparency of political advertising, closure of fake accounts and marking systems for automated bots). The platforms should provide complete information, including by replying to Commission's specific requests, on how they are implementing the commitments on a monthly basis. This information will also be published.

By the end of 2019, the Commission will carry out a comprehensive assessment at the end of the Code's initial 12-month period. Should the results prove unsatisfactory, the Commission may propose further actions, including of a regulatory nature.

The Commission will seek the assistance of ERGA, the independent network of audio-visual regulators under the Audio-visual Media Services Directive (AVMSD), in monitoring the implementation of the Code in the various Member States. ERGA is uniquely placed to carry out

⁵ <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/online-platforms-advertisers-and-advertising-industry-present-commissioner-mariya-gabriel>.

⁶ Under the Code, the trade association signatories, while not entering into obligations on behalf of their members, have committed to make their members fully aware of the Code and to encourage them to join it or respect its principles, as appropriate.

this task given the expertise and competence of its members. The Commission may also seek the assistance of the European audio-visual observatory.

In monitoring the implementation of the Code, the Commission envisages to collect the following information from the signatories:

A. Scrutiny of ad placements	
1. Deploy policies and processes to disrupt advertising and monetisation incentives for relevant behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of accounts removed for violation of platform advertising policies (e.g. policies against misrepresentation) • Policies put in place to demote sites or accounts that distribute disinformation or inauthentic information (e.g., click-bait) • Percentage of contracts between advertisers and ad network operators with brand safety stipulations against placement of ads on disinformation websites • Number of websites blocked for duplicating or "scraping" content produced by other websites
B. Political advertising and issue-based advertising	
2. All advertisements should be clearly distinguishable from editorial content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ads properly labelled as political advertising as a % of overall political ads • Actions taken to ensure all political ads are properly labelled • Number of political or issue-based ads taken down for failure to comply with platform guidelines on the transparency of political advertising
3. Enable public disclosure of political advertising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of records added to public disclosure repositories • Information on amounts received from political parties, candidates, campaigns and foundations for political or issue-based advertising • Policies to verify the identity of political ads providers
4. Devising approaches to publicly disclose "issue-based advertising"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information on progress on this commitment
C. Integrity of services	
5. Put in place clear policies regarding identity and the misuse of automated bots on their services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of identified active fake accounts • Number of identified active fake accounts disabled for violation of platform policies • Information on measures to ensure all bots are clearly labelled as such.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of posts, images, videos or comments acted against for violation of platform policies on the misuse of automated bots
6. Put in place policies on what constitutes impermissible use of automated systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information on policies about the misuse of bots, including information about such bot-driven interactions • Number of bots disabled for malicious activities violating the platforms' policies
D. Empowering consumers	
7. Invest in products, technologies and programs [...] to help people make informed decisions when they encounter online news that may be false	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information on investments made in such tools or other progress towards this commitment • Information on actual use of such tools by consumers • Information on collaborations with media organisations and fact-checkers to carry out this commitment, including development of indicators of trustworthiness • Information on measures to make fact-checked content more visible and widespread.
8. Invest in technological means to prioritise relevant, authentic and authoritative information where appropriate in search, feeds, or other automatically ranked distribution channels.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information on progress on this commitment • Information on collaborations with media organisations and fact-checkers to carry out this commitment , including the development of indicators of trustworthiness
9. Invest in features and tools that make it easier for people to find diverse perspectives about topics of public interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information on investments made in such tools or other progress towards this commitment • Information on availability of such tools and use of such tools by consumers
10. Partner with civil society, governments, educational institutions, and other stakeholders to support efforts aimed at improving critical thinking and digital media literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information about initiatives carried out or planned by signatories, including degree of coverage across Member States
11. Encourage market uptake of tools that help consumers understand why they are seeing particular advertisements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information on actual uptake of such tools and use by consumers
E. Empowering the research community	
12. Support good faith independent efforts to track Disinformation and understand its impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information on collaborations with fact-checkers and researchers, including records shared

13. Not to prohibit or discourage good faith research into Disinformation and political advertising on their platforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information on policies implementing this commitment
14. Encourage research into Disinformation and political advertising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information on policies implementing this commitment
15. Convene an annual event to foster discussions within academia, the fact-checking community and members of the value chain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report on the annual event

This information should be provided on an individual Member State basis in order enable the assessment of gaps and variations in the Code's implementation and impact across the Union.

The Commission recognises, as the Code states, that "*because the various Signatories operate differently, with different purposes, technologies and audiences, the Code allows for different approaches to accomplishing the spirit of the provisions herein*". The information the signatories provide should therefore reflect the particularities of their respective services.

It is also important to strike a balance between the right to freedom of expression and the need for citizens to be properly informed. In this context, it must be borne in mind that disinformation very often does not qualify as illegal content; where it does qualify (e.g. as defamation or hate speech), it will also be subject to specific remedies under Union or national law (e.g., take-down of content), the effectiveness of which may be quantifiable. The Code addresses an array of objectives related to disinformation, some of which can be quantified, such as transparency of political ads or measures to reduce the number of fake accounts, while others, such as consumer empowerment, can be implemented in ways that are not always quantifiable. For these reasons, the overall assessment of the Code will necessarily comprise both qualitative and quantitative data for analysis as appropriate.

2.1.2 Strengthening fact checking, collective knowledge, and monitoring capacity on disinformation

The Commission committed, as a first step, to support the creation of an independent European network of fact-checkers. As a second step, the Commission committed to launch a secure European online platform on disinformation, offering analytical tools and cross-border data collection, including Union-wide open data and online platforms usage data, to support detection and analysis of disinformation sources and dissemination patterns.

The Commission organised a series of technical workshops with representatives of the fact-checking community in 2018. It selected relevant projects under the research and innovation programme Horizon 2020. Furthermore, the Commission, in cooperation with the European Parliament, organised a fact-checking conference in view of the European elections.⁷

These actions have contributed to:

- mapping and networking together independent fact-checking organisations in the Member States;
- ascertaining which tools and services are essential and can improve fact-checking activities and their impact (e.g. access to EUROSTAT data, translation tools, automated stream of fact-checks produced by the relevant fact-checking organisations);

⁷ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20180920IPR14065/fact-checking-in-the-eu>.

- Identifying professional and ethical standards for independent fact-checking; and
- Providing tools and infrastructural support to fact-checking organisations.

In particular, a support action **SOMA** (Social Observatory for Disinformation and Social Media Analysis)⁸, was selected under the Horizon 2020 programme to create a multidisciplinary community, including fact-checkers and academic researchers, to enhance detection as well as analytical capabilities and better understand various types of disinformation threats. To this end, SOMA, which was launched on 1 November 2018, will provide an IT pilot infrastructure.

To prepare the second step, the Commission proposed, under the Connecting Europe Facility work programme 2019, the creation of a new digital service infrastructure for the establishment of a European Platform on Disinformation. The digital service infrastructure should scale up the collaboration between fact-checkers and academic researchers in order to ensure full coverage of the Union territory and facilitate the build-up and interconnection of relevant national organisations.

The actions taken by the Commission have increased interest in fact-checking activities in Europe. Online platforms, media outlets, and fact-checkers are planning projects with a view to European elections.

For instance, the International Fact-checking Network (IFCN) is creating an alliance of European fact-checkers that should contribute to a project focused on European Parliament elections. A similar project is planned by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), which represents public service media organisations. Online platforms, such as Google and Facebook, have expressed their interest in collaborating with such projects. The support action SOMA should promote cooperation among these initiatives and boost their efficiency and impact.

The project should operate according to established and recognised professional standards (e.g., IFCN principles, ethical research, and journalistic standards). Moreover, participants should operate with full independence, free from public interference and based on governance rules set out by the participant organisations.

However, current fact-checking efforts do not offer sufficient geographical coverage or have the capacity to keep abreast of the increasing volumes of online news content. For instance, the IFCN network currently covers only 12 Member States. The EBU's fact-checking network, while having Europe-wide coverage, only provides services to EBU members. Moreover, fact-checking activities are very often limited to the verification of online content, without analysis of disinformation sources and patterns.

While the digital service infrastructure financed under the Connecting Europe Facility programme should provide infrastructure to facilitate networking and cross-border exchange of information between fact-checkers and academic researchers, an efficient and effective response to disinformation threats requires the strengthening of detection and analytical capabilities based on specific knowledge of local information environments. Therefore, there is a need to develop multidisciplinary communities of fact-checkers and academic researchers at national level, which will require the active cooperation of Member States.

2.1.3. Fostering online accountability

⁸ www.disinobservatory.org.

With a view to increasing trust and accountability online, the Commission committed to promote the use of voluntary online systems allowing the identification of suppliers of information based on trustworthy electronic identification and authentication means.

To this end, the Commission has mobilised the Cooperation Network set up under the electronic Identification and Authentication Service Regulation (eIDAS) and launched discussions on how to achieve progress in this area at the 10th Cooperation Network meeting on 11 July 2018.

The Commission has also engaged with the Horizon 2020 project **Co-inform**, whose objective is to create a user-friendly technological tool, using the co-creation methodology, to make sure that policymakers, fact-checkers and citizens are involved in improving the efficiency of disinformation-detection technology. The project involves academic researchers, technology companies and fact-checkers from different Member States. It should explore the use of trustworthy identification and authentication means, aligned with the eIDAS Regulation, for the identification of suppliers of information, with the aim to pilot this approach in their tools.

The project should support the Cooperation Network in its endeavour to promote the voluntary adoption of the eIDAS tools and services for the secure identification and authentication of suppliers of information (websites, natural and legal entities).

The dialogue between the Commission and Member States in 2018 raised awareness on how eIDAS tools and services could be relied upon to tackle disinformation by increasing accountability and encouraging more responsible behaviour online. The Commission will continue working with the Cooperation Network and platform providers on fostering the development and the voluntary use of systems for the secure identification of suppliers of information based on the highest security and privacy standards, including the possible use of verified pseudonyms.

2.1.4. Harnessing new technologies

The Commission committed to make full use of the Horizon 2020 framework programme to mobilise new technologies and to explore the possibility of additional support for tools that combat disinformation, accelerating time-to-market of high-impact innovation activities, and encouraging the partnering of researchers and businesses.

In 2013 the Commission started financing the first research and innovation actions focused on the development of new technologies to help assessing the veracity of content posted online. Projects like **SocialSensor** and **Reveal** have been pioneers in this field and have devolved tools now used by large news organisation and non-governmental organisations.

Currently, under the European Research Council (ERC) and Horizon 2020, there are several actions aimed at improving the understanding of online disinformation and developing new tools for content verification. The ERC projects **Comprop** and the **Botfind** are studying how automated systems for spreading and targeting propaganda impact public discourse in Europe. The ERC project **Debunker** is studying, from a theoretical point of view, the problem of misperceptions around societal issues within the European population and possible strategies to reduce their impact.

The Horizon 2020 project **Invid** focuses on developing tools to verify audiovisual content. These tools are essential considering that technologies to tamper with video and create “deep fakes” are increasingly easy to access and use. Another Horizon 2020 project, **Fandango**, looks at solutions that help traditional media to better detect false narratives online.

Since information technology and the phenomenon of online disinformation are evolving rapidly, the Commission has decided to step up efforts. It has selected four new research and innovation actions, for about 10 MEUR of Union contribution. The selected actions are: Eunomia (open source solution to identify sources of information), SocialTruth (distributed ecosystem that allows easy access to various verification services), Provenance (intermediary-free solution for digital content verification) and WeVerify (content verification challenges through a participatory verification approach). These new projects aim at developing services for communities active in fighting online disinformation.

Furthermore, in the proposal for Horizon Europe programme⁹, the Commission has proposed to dedicate efforts to:

- safeguard democratic and economic stability through the development of new tools to combat online disinformation;
- better understand the role of journalistic standards and user-generated content in a hyper-connected society; and
- support next generation Internet application and services including immersive and trustworthy media, social media and social networking.

2.2 Secure and resilient election processes

The second set of actions addresses manipulation and disinformation tactics employed during electoral processes. In order to enable secure and resilient election processes, the Commission proposed to initiate a continuous dialogue to support Member States in the management of risks to democratic electoral process from cyber-attacks and disinformation, particularly in view of European elections in 2019.

To this end, the Commission started in 2018 a constructive dialogue with Member States. This included a first exchange at the conference on electoral best practices held on 25-26 April 2018, which also involved representatives of the Networks and Information Security (NIS) Cooperation Group and electoral committees.

Based on the contributions of authorities responsible for the implementation of the NIS Directive¹⁰ and the support provided by Commission and European Network and Information Security Agency (ENISA), the NIS Cooperation Group delivered a Compendium on cyber security of election technology¹¹ in July 2018. The Compendium is a practical document that looks at specific threats and provides useful examples to electoral committees on how to manage the risks posed to the cybersecurity of elections.

The High-level conference "Election Interference in the Digital Age: Building Resilience to Cyber-Enabled Threats"¹² took place on 15-16 October 2018 in Brussels. The Conference allowed participants to acquire a better understanding of the issues related to cybersecurity of elections and enabled NIS competent authorities and electoral committees to discuss possible next steps for the implementation of relevant security measures regarding the next European elections.

⁹ COM(2018) 435.

¹⁰ Directive (EU) 2016/1148 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 6 July 2016 concerning measures for a high common level of security of network and information systems across the Union.

¹¹ CG Publication 03/2018 - Compendium on cyber security of election technology. Available here: http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/document.cfm?doc_id=53645.

¹² https://ec.europa.eu/epsc/events/election-interference-digital-age-building-resilience-cyber-enabled-threats_en.

The Commission convened a range of stakeholders to discuss democracy in Europe, including resilient electoral process and open democratic debate, at its annual Colloquium on fundamental rights, held on 26-27 November in Brussels. Several hundred stakeholders attended, including national and European policymakers, international organisations, civil society organisations, media and social media representatives, the world of business and education, and identified new avenues to foster free, open and healthy democratic participation.

The Commission will follow up on the conclusions of the colloquium¹³, including through the work of the national and European election cooperation networks, currently being established in the framework of the Commission's election package of September 2018¹⁴. The national election networks will bring together authorities with responsibility for elections with other authorities including media regulators, and data protection and cyber security authorities. The European cooperation network will support the exchange of information and best practices among Member States and Union bodies, and will meet for the first time in January 2019.

Commission activities during 2018 have consolidated the dialogue between the Commission and Member States, raising awareness and strengthening capacities to manage risks to democratic electoral process presented by cyber-attacks and disinformation.

2.3 Fostering education and media literacy

The third set of actions focus on fostering education and media literacy. The life-long development of critical and digital competences is crucial to reinforce the resilience of our societies to disinformation. The Communication proposed new actions to this end, including: supporting the provision of educational materials by independent fact-checkers and civil society organisations to schools and educators; organising a European Week of Media Literacy; exploring the possibility of adding media literacy to the criteria used by the OECD in its comparative reports on international student assessment; and further encouraging the implementation of ongoing initiatives on digital skills, education and traineeship.

Following the adoption of the Communication, signatories to the Code of Practice on Disinformation have committed to collaborate with civil society, governments, educational institutions, and other stakeholders to support efforts aimed at improving critical thinking and digital media literacy, including training actions and the provision of tools to help users identify disinformation.

In June 2018, the Commission discussed with national authorities and stakeholders within the Media Literacy Expert Group, possible options for the organisation of a European Week of Media Literacy (EUMLW) in 2019 to raise awareness around disinformation. The EUMLW should combine events and initiatives at Union level with events taking place at national level (workshops, open door sessions in newsrooms and practical training courses on social media use) to benefit from a multiplying effect. It should also seek the involvement of stakeholders belonging to the 'Safer Internet' and 'Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition' communities in order to ensure synergies with these

¹³ Follow up will focus on actions around which a consensus emerged, which could include, for example, an evaluation of the sufficiency in the online context of existing national rules on the transparency of political advertising.

¹⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/soteu2018-cybersecurity-elections-recommendation-5949_en.pdf.

initiatives. The week should have an important focus on the challenge to counter disinformation in view of the upcoming 2019 European elections.

The Commission co-funded Safer Internet Centres in Member States to act as multipliers of the #SaferInternet4EU Campaign, which aims at raising awareness about media literacy, informing parents and professionals of the opportunities and risks online and promoting a positive use of media among children and young people. In particular, this campaign contributes to empower online users to recognise possible bias, spin or misinformation¹⁵.

Moreover, the forthcoming revised AVMSD, already approved by the Council, on 6 November 2018 recognises the importance of media literacy and introduces a legal obligation for Member States to “promote and take measures for the development of media literacy skills” (Article 33a). In addition, in view of the central role played by video-sharing platforms in giving access to audiovisual content and the resulting societal responsibility, the revised AVMSD obliges them to provide “for effective media literacy measures and tools and rais[e] users’ awareness of these measures and tools” (Article 28b(3)(j)). These provisions introduce rules for Member States and video-sharing platforms on media literacy, and establish a co-regulatory system with reinforced cooperation between industry, civil society, Member States and regulators.

Under that Directive, Member States will have to report to the Commission on the implementation of their media literacy plans. The Commission, in consultation with the Contact Committee, will issue guidelines on the scope of this reporting obligation.

National audio-visual regulatory authorities have also carried out work within ERGA (the Commission expert group of audio-visual regulators) on media plurality, covering issues such as balanced and impartial media coverage during elections, opinion polls and political campaigns.

In addition, the Commission continued its discussion in 2018 with the OECD on the possibility of adding media literacy to the criteria used by the organisation in its comparative reports, focusing on the forthcoming questionnaire for the Programme of international student assessment (PISA) 2021. To this end, the OECD was open to the Commission’s suggestion to cover online disinformation and fake news as part of the ICT familiarity questionnaire, which should feed into the review of the PISA assessment criteria. The OECD is currently in the process of refining the questionnaire with draft questions that should be tested in 2019.

With regards to digital skills, 23 National Coalitions, which have been created since the launch of the Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition in December 2016, offered a large number of activities such as training on-line and face to face, awareness raising campaigns and certifications for Europeans to improve their digital skills.

In October 2018, the Governing Board of the Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition, set up in September 2017, presented its priorities for the coming months which include promoting and leveraging existing tools to support the acquisition of digital skills for all and expanding EU Code Week¹⁶ to reach at least 50% of all schools in the Union by 2020.

¹⁵ Regular updates, resources, and list of safer internet events in Member States can be found on the portal: www.betterinternetforkids.eu.

¹⁶ EU Code Week is a grassroots initiative, which aims to bring coding and digital literacy to everybody in a fun and engaging way. <https://codeweek.eu/>.

2.4. Support for quality journalism as an essential element of a democratic society

The fourth set of actions aims to support quality journalism as an essential element of a democratic society. Quality news media and journalism can uncover and dilute disinformation, providing citizens high-quality and diverse information. The Communication proposed to enhance the transparency and predictability of State aid rules for the media sector by making available an online repository of decisions. The Communication also proposed to launch a call in 2018 for the production and dissemination of quality news content on Union affairs through data-driven news media and to explore increased funding opportunities to support initiatives promoting media freedom and pluralism, and modernisation of news rooms.

Following the Communication, the Commission made available an online repository on the applicable State aid rules and relevant precedent cases on its website¹⁷. It references applicable State aid rules and relevant Commission decisions on State aid to public service broadcasting and State aid to the press, and provides links to relevant commentary from the Commission's Competition Policy Newsletter. Updated information on aid granted by Member States in these domains is accessible on the transparency register¹⁸.

Furthermore, on 26 June 2018, the Commission launched a call, of about EUR 1.9 million, for the production and dissemination of quality news content on Union affairs through data-driven news media. The call closed on 25 September, having resulted in four project proposals. Evaluation of the proposals is ongoing, and it is envisioned that projects awarded grants will start in the first quarter of 2019.

In addition to the R&D projects presented in section 2.1.4, the 2020 work programme under Horizon 2020 will cater for additional investments in innovation projects with a view to selecting, launching and incubating ideas for innovative services and tools fostering the modernisation of newsrooms.

To stabilise actions in favour of quality journalism, media freedom, media pluralism and media literacy, the Commission is proposing a dedicated budget in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (2021-2027, Creative Europe, Cross sectorial strand). This should allow addressing the structural changes faced by the media sector by promoting and monitoring a diverse and pluralistic media environment.

About the promotion of media freedom, quality news media and journalism, the Commission co-funded the activities of the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF)¹⁹. In 2018, the main task of ECPMF was to support investigative journalists, via the allocation of grants for investigative cross-border journalistic work. In June 2018, an independent jury has selected 12 investigative journalism projects for funding under the inaugural round of the IJ4EU fund.

Moreover, pursuant to funding by the European Parliament, three calls for pilot projects are being launched to support projects in the following areas:

¹⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/competition/sectors/media/overview_en.html#disinformation.

¹⁸ <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/competition/transparency/public/search/home?lang=en>.

¹⁹ Based in Leipzig, the ECPMF's main aim is to unite Europe's fragmented media freedom community and to address media freedom violations in EU Member States and beyond. The Centre provides practical help to journalists in need and works with partners to raise awareness on media freedom issues in the EU and Candidate Countries. Partners of the ECPMF are supporting and monitoring media freedom in the EU and Candidate Countries.

- An exchange programme for media practitioners;
- An internship programme for journalists working in minority language media;
- A project to map and support Media Councils.

Finally, the Fundamental Rights Agency continued its development work on a toolkit for media professionals, which is a web-based capacity building platform with content developed by private media stakeholders to support journalists in producing quality news.

2.5 Countering internal and external disinformation threats through strategic communication

In line with the April communication, the European Commission worked to ensure the internal coordination of its communication activities aiming at tackling disinformation. In this context, it created an internal Network against Disinformation the primary purpose of which is to enable its services to better detect harmful narratives, support a culture of fact-checking, provide fast responses and strengthen more effective positive messaging²⁰. The Commission reinforced cooperation with the European Parliament and East Strategic Communication Task Force through a tripartite forum that aims to operationalise the institutions' respective efforts in countering disinformation ahead of the 2019 European elections.

3. SUMMARY

Overall, the actions outlined in the Communication have been accomplished or launched during 2018. Online platforms and the advertising industry have agreed on a Code of Practice to increase online transparency and protect consumers, with a particular view to the European elections in 2019. A network of fact checkers is being created that will strengthen capabilities to detect and debunk false narratives. The Commission will facilitate their work by providing the necessary infrastructure without interfering in their tasks. Stakeholders should be able to benefit from a number of research and innovation tools to identify and tackle disinformation, while consumers should benefit from better online accountability of suppliers of information. Awareness has increased across Member States about the need to protect democratic processes from cyber threats. This goes hand in hand with sustained efforts, at EU and national level, to raise the level of media literacy and empower users, especially the younger generations, and improve critical thinking. Support to quality journalism should also contribute to dilute disinformation and provide citizens with high quality and diverse information.

The Commission will closely monitor the implementation of ongoing actions addressed in this Report, in particular the Code of Practice on Disinformation, and continue to evaluate whether further actions, including measures of regulatory nature, are necessary.

²⁰ This network includes also the Commission representations in the Member States.