Smart eDemocracy Against Fake News

Recommendations to EU and member states to tackle disinformation

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SMARTED PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The rising amount of fake news has become a very significant challenge for our democratic societies. We are seeing the effects of the negative impact and we understand that it has no limits and affects all issues concerning the European Union. One thing is clear – wise and active citizenship by each of us is very significant to combat the growing challenge of fake news!

The project "Smart eDemocracy Against Fake News" (SMARTeD) brings together nine active civic organizations across Europe with an intention to raise awareness on the impact of the fake news phenomenon on active citizenship at national and European level with focus on e-participation as well as to raise practical awareness of skillful participation through eDemocracy tools.

PROJECT RESULTS INCLUDED IN THIS OVERVIEW:

1. Outcomes of survey on disinformation and fake news usable in wider national and EU level context
2. Recommendations for EU-policy makers and member states with citizens' ideas and needs to tackle fake news for more active and wise eparticipation
3. List of different eDemocracy tools and skills needed to tackle the fake news through practical workshops of e-participation
4. Methodology of one-day program of the practical local workshop on disinformation, usable for similar events in Europe as it would be flexible (for different realities) with international scope.

KEY FINDINGS FROM SURVEY ON DISINFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS

About the survey

Following the aim of the project, an on-line survey has been implemented to collect national realities, approaches and practical applications with the following specific objectives:
(1) To assess the overall relevance of the issue of the disinformation and fake news in partnering countries of the project.
(2) To assess the significance and effectiveness of different actions aimed to minimise the negative effects of the disinformation on national and European level, including actions that can be taken by online platforms, and the use of e-democracy tools.
(3) To address the role of politicization in disinformation strategies as one of the causes of disinformation and fake news.

On-line survey assessed the relevance of the issue of disinformation and fake news in 6 EU member states Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Greece, Latvia and Slovenia. On-line survey data collection took place in October and November 2018.

Read the full Survey report on:
https://smartedemocracy.org/research-on-disinformation/.

Key findings from the survey

The following key findings have been extracted from the descriptive analysis of the survey data:

Mapping the disinformation and fake news issue

- 63% of survey respondents indicated that disinformation in their countries is definitely a problem.
- Respondents come across news or information that they believe misrepresent reality or is false at least once a week on average.
- On average, respondents feel personally confident to identify news or information that misrepresent reality or is false.
- On average respondents are not very confident in their fellow citizens ability to identify news or information that misrepresent reality or is false.
- An average share of population in surveyed countries that cannot identify disinformation is 46%.
- Migration policies are an area of public life that is harmed to the greatest extent by an intentional disinformation, followed by lack of trust in public institutions, elected representatives and voting decisions.
- Respondents recognize politicization of certain things, events, processes and milestones of present or past as a considerable challenge in the social and political life in the contemporary Europe.
- Current social issues (refugees, immigrants) are the most often politicized topic, followed by milestones of history and national security.

- Politicization of certain things, events, social processes or milestones of history can produce a significant change in the way audience perceives certain phenomena in their countries.
- Intentional political abuse a for political purposes is very likely to cause harm to society in their countries according to survey respondents.
- Anonymous social media accounts and politicians, followed by political parties, are the most likely agents to create and disseminate disinformation.
- Social media and messaging apps, followed by online blogs and forums are most often indicated by respondents as the media in which people come across disinformation.

Addressing disinformation and fake news
- Majority of respondents agree that nations should take certain measures in tackling disinformation.
- Raising awareness among the public is considered by respondents the most effective measure for curtailing the adverse effects of disinformation.
- Followed by implementing tougher self-regulating measures that strengthen accountability, fact checking, collective knowledge and monitoring capacity of disinformation among information providers.
- Commonly identified policies considered or already implemented to address the disinformation in surveyed countries are promoting media and information literacy to counter disinformation and help users navigate the digital media environment.
- Promoting media and information literacy and encouraging critical thinking about the origin of the information on the internet are the most often preferred policies to address the disinformation in surveyed countries.

- Media / journalists and policy makers are most often recognized as groups that should take the leading role for curtailing the adverse effects of disinformation.
- Majority of respondents agree that online platforms should assume greater responsibilities in protecting the users from disinformation.
- Ensuring transparency about sponsored content is the most frequently indicated effort that should be stepped-up by online platforms in protecting its users from disinformation, followed by an effective closing of fake accounts and providing fact-checking access to platform via application programming interfaces.
- The majority survey participants (88%) indicated that the EU should be empowered to take a more active role in combating fake news/misinformation/politicization of information.

E-democracy tools to address the disinformation
- Tools aimed at reporting disinformation and specific platforms for making sound decisions before voting are the most frequent e-democracy tools used in surveyed countries to minimise the negative effects of the disinformation.
- Suggested e-democracy tools to be used more to minimise disinformation in surveyed countries are content trustworthiness rating systems in line with journalistic principles and tools aimed at reporting the disinformation, followed by trusted fact-checking organizations and academia with access to platform data.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO EU AND MEMBER STATES TO TACKLE DISINFORMATION

In this section you can find recommendations to minimize the negative consequences by fake news on citizens' e-participation. The following recommendations have been collected from 12 local workshops organized in 2019 by SMARTeD partners in 6 project countries - Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Greece, Latvia and Slovenia. A total of 389 people participated in the shaping of the following recommendations to the EU and its member states. Recommendations include the following elements: EU policy and funding, accountability, responsible media, encouraging cooperation, education, tech tools.

EU POLICY AND FUNDING

Strengthening and expanding the existing EU policy on disinformation, supporting media literacy and active citizenship. Ensure funding in support of national and local initiatives that fight disinformation and strengthen fact-checking platforms.

Citizens' ideas:
- Subsidizing countries that introduce programs in schools **EU level**
- Funding translations of the existing (tech) tools across EU **EU level**

ACCOUNTABILITY

Introducing laws, regulations and penalties on EU and national level, preventing the spreading of disinformation via media and social networks.

Citizens' ideas:
- A single European Regulatory Framework for Disinformation **EU level**
- Establishment of national agencies (funded by all media) where journalists check the news
- Law that obligates social media to introduce algorithms that track and enable reporting of fake news and following fact checking **EU level**

RESPONSIBLE MEDIA

Encouraging the development of a trustworthy and responsible media ecosystem in Europe.

Citizens' ideas:
- A certificate of reliability given to news outlets, social media actors etc. **EU level**
- National press "trust ability" list
- EU awards for trustable media **EU level**
- Create a European press agency (similar to Reuters or AFP) **EU level**
- Transparency of media (e.g. funding, ownership)
- Stronger monitoring of media registration process – setting stronger rules for registration and better categorization of media
- Establishment of an organization with experts/fact checkers that will check for fake news with funding of 10% of ads

ENCOURAGING COOPERATION

Working towards cross-sectoral, cross-national cooperation in sharing the best practices and achieving common goals.

Citizens' ideas:
- EU Program for exchanging know-how and best practices for journalists, focusing on media literacy, data journaling etc

EU level

EDUCATION

Introducing education on media literacy and critical thinking in schools, starting from an early age. Carrying out awareness campaigns and supporting non-formal education activities.

Citizens' ideas:
- Educational campaigns in schools using digital applications to raise awareness of the issue
- EU awareness raising campaign lead by youth **EU level**
- Establishment of European Day Against Fake News with a clear message such as "Stay Calm and Double-Check" **EU level**
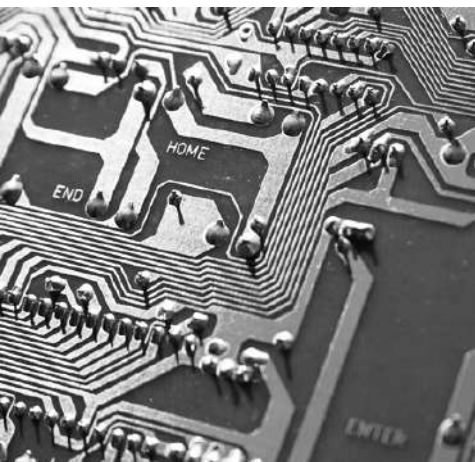
TECH TOOLS

Developing new fact-checking tools locally and using AI systems to assist in fake news detection. Ensure funds for the support of already existing tools.

Citizens' ideas:
- Developing a web or browser plugin for the EU countries that will enable users to vote, interact and label news as reliable or fake **EU level**
- Supporting national fact checking and reliability checking portals

E-DEMOCRACY TOOLS TO ADDRESS THE DISINFORMATION

This section gathers pre-existing national and international level tools, practices and EU bodies that EU citizens found useful to address the disinformation.
Additionally to the tools mentioned below, here are the list of valuable interactive tools gathered by Project partner organizations: https://smartedemocracy.org/interactive-tools/

PRE-EXISTING INTERNATIONAL TOOLS/PRACTICES/EU BODIES

- A Code of Practice on Disinformation
- Financial support for media literacy allowing to create projects like SMARTeD
- East StratCom Task Force - EEAS
- Different OSINT techniques
- ESCAPE method
- Code for online platforms – e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Google - who have centers to find and remove fake news and disinformation
- Browser Add-on for indicating articles from "suspicious" sites
- Google reverse image search
- Euandi2019.eu
- Yourvotematters.eu
- Debunk.eu
- DFRLab
- The „Bad news" game

PRE-EXISTING NATIONAL TOOLS

- Propastop (Estonia)
- Manipulatori.cz (Czech Republic)
- Hoax.cz (Czech Republic)
- National institute Centrum (Czech Republic)
- European Values institute (Czech Republic)
- Demagogue.cz (Czech Republic)
- Razkrinkavanje.si (Slovenia)
- Ellinikahoaxes.gr (Greece)
- Rebaltica.lv (Latvia)
- Datagora.fr (France)
- Captainfact.io (France)
- Seriously.ong (France)

METHODICAL MATERIAL FOR LOCAL WORKSHOPS ON DISINFORMATION

This section highlights the recommendations on how to organize practical workshop on e-participation while developing skills such as critical thinking, media literacy, and communication.

The following workshop module has been designed based on project "Smart eDemocracy Against Fake News" needs. However, it can be exploited for other necessities and similar projects. The module implementation is flexible in terms of selecting learning objectives and corresponding activities, enabling event organizers and facilitators to adjust to specific situations in their countries and to the capacities of particular participants.

Please find below key information which can be relevant for planning your local events and download the full workshop module description here: https://smartedemocracy.org/practical-program/

WORKSHOP OVERVIEW

This module description relates to the two one-day local workshops - (a) workshop for young people and (b) workshop for NGO and other activists. One workshop is organized specifically targeting young people in rural areas aged 18 – 25. The other workshop aims at involving NGO sector representatives and local citizens interested in the topic. Each workshop is designed for 30 participants. Both activities have to be organized in cooperation with local organizations. The workshop venue needs to be chosen in a rural area or a small city close to the rural area. It's important to achieve the mentioned audience from rural areas both for young people and NGOs. The methodological approach is developed by organization "ManaBalss" (Latvia) in cooperation with project SMARTeD partners and involvement of a trainer working in a field of non-formal education and experiential learning. The involvement of trainers working in the field of non-formal education, having expertise in the field of media literacy, and knowing approaches working with young people and NGOs is mandatory. It is advisable to cooperate with fake news fighters in your country, while developing local content for the workshop.

Participants of the workshop will discover the phenomenon of fake news and its consequences in a global EU context. The following themes need to be raised in educational workshop programme:

- What is fake news?
- What are the consequences of fake news on local, national, regional and European level?
- How can European citizens deal with fake news?
- Developing participants' critical thinking by providing participants tools for analysing content (E.S.C.A.P.E. method).
- National and European initiatives (including European citizen initiative) to address the issue of fake news.
- E-platforms in EU and national levels.
- Participants have to develop recommendations on citizen's needs and ideas on how to tackle fake news for more active and wise e-participation. At the end of the workshop participants' evaluation should take place with both formal evaluation (questionnaire) and non-formal one.
- Contests results and award ceremony "The first time I realised the media lied to me"

LIST OF SITUATIONS / INSTITUTIONS / PROCESSES IN WHICH SUCH WORKSHOP MODEL COULD BE FULLY IMPLEMENTED:

- As a part of external curriculum or optional activities for pupils in primary and secondary schools.
- During (pre-)election campaigns for national elections, referendums or European elections when the fake news issues are higher on public agenda and consequently attract more attention.
- For members of large NGOs networks and youth organizations which can bring / motivate an adequate number of members to attend such a workshop.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BETTER ENGAGEMENT

This workshop module has been tested in 12 local events in Latvia, Estonia, Slovenia, Czech Republic, France and Greece. These are the main suggestions on an effective event management, retrieved from the workshop module evaluation sessions:

- Engage a local NGO or an active community group, use their network to get support in communication for attracting participants.
- To reach the desired number of participants, the following one-day program can be divided and organized as a two-day event (for example, in evenings).
- Organize this workshop as a part of another event, that has a wider audience reach and a greater visibility.
- Use social channels effectively, for example, build-up the intrigue behind the upcoming workshop by sharing interesting pictures, engaging topical news, videos and even contests.