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Five fact-checking tips from disinformation experts

Ahead of the International Fact Checking Day on 2 April, we met with the European Digital Media Observatory which is an EU-wide platform to combat disinformation while protecting the core value of freedom of expression.

01 April 2022 - By KEVIN CASEY

The modern era of disinformation can be said to have begun in the 1980s. Operatives from the then Soviet Union concocted the lie that the AIDS epidemic sweeping the world at that time was created in a government laboratory in the US.

In a vast, worldwide operation involving field offices, agents and huge investments in newspapers, radio and even publishing a book, for years the KGB pushed the fake narrative to undermine the US and its allies. Known as Operation Infektion, the disinformation campaign was used to sow doubt and create social and political tensions all around the world.

Eventually, the story was repeated in 80 countries and translated into 30 languages until the Soviets admitted to making the whole thing up in 1987. Despite detailed admissions by senior Soviets, the rumour persists to this day, nearly 40 years later.

Spreads like wildfire

Nowadays, modern social networks provide immediate access to information from anywhere, wherever you are in the world.

While disinformation is nothing new, it spreads much faster now. Often it rides on a wave of emotion through personal social networks. Disinformation comes from a variety of sources, foreign and domestic. It is a complex phenomenon with impacts in the real world.

'It's only by understanding disinformation that you can tackle it,' says Paula Gori, Secretary-General and Coordinator of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO).

EDMO is an independent EU-funded project whose aim is to bring together a wide range of factcheckers, researchers and stakeholders to combat disinformation.

EDMO is focused on the resilience of societies and looks at disinformation regardless of where it originates. It brings together a wide range of researchers and stakeholders in a consortium to understand disinformation and counter it.

'We bring together people, weaving together facts and evidence,' she said. 'EDMO acts as a community builder that brings together the stakeholders ensuring a multidisciplinary approach.'

Not all disinformation narratives are fabricated and promoted by malicious actors. Sometimes, they start as a normal reaction to try to grasp complex situations. We know from research that emotions play a key role in the spread of disinformation, and this was confirmed again during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Gori recalls the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, people were scrolling through social network feeds with a sense of foreboding. 'They were scared and were looking for information. The fact that the virus was new to the scientific community made it even easier to spread disinformation,' she said.

'Whatever you were seeing on screen, you were sharing it, because you actually were fearing for your life and you were not taking time to think before sharing.'

It is when online misinformation and false information is created and disseminated with the intent to intentionally deceive the public or to cause public harm that it becomes dangerous disinformation. That is the moment that we must react at all levels of society, together, to tackle the issue.

There are elements of sociology, anthropology, psychology, neuroscience, media literacy and more in that one impulse to share information with your friends and family, which is why 'the multidisciplinary approach is fundamental,' she said.

EDMO is set up to support the creation of a cross-border and multidisciplinary community of independent fact-checkers and academic researchers on disinformation in the EU.

EDMO has been enlarged to include national and regional research hubs, which are in a position to use their specific knowledge of local information environments. This will improve detection and analysis of disinformation threats and trends across Europe.

Freedom of expression

Even though EDMO is building resilience against disinformation, an individual's opinions about any particular topic is never in question. 'You have to guarantee freedom of expression,' says Lauri Tierala, Programme Director, EDMO.

'You cannot regulate disinformation away,' he said. 'You cannot have a Ministry of Truth.'

‘There are, obviously, legitimate reasons in every society for political differences,’ he said. ‘But creating artificial dividing lines via disinformation leading to polarisation only weakens the whole society.’ In the Information Age, bad information can be highly damaging.

The war in Ukraine has made things even more complicated. In a recent post on the EDMO website, they investigated how social media channels that were usually centres of COVID-19 scepticism have suddenly pivoted to pushing disinformation about the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

There are many incentives to publish fake news and disinformation. It could be a power play by a nation state actor or an advertising play by a monetising/financial interest. Some people then just share with their networks, believing they’re doing some good when they’re not, but without malicious intent. Disinformation has different origins and dynamics in how it spreads.

Unfortunately, disinformation is here to stay. At times, it sinks to the level of being an existential threat by having a negative impact on public health and global issues like respondsing to Covid-19 or climate-change. In some contexts, it has been used to motivate violence and it has a negative influence in the public debate, especially when it’s part of a complex web of interactions.

Fact-checking is an essential skill to bring to the table but EDMO has a broader mission to tackle disinformation and a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary way.

Informed decisions

There is an onus on each of us to make informed decisions. We choose to go our own way with the information that's available to us - red, green or blue, but we should have good quality information, argues Gori.

EDMO is there to assist that process, she explains. It helps to increase awareness of disinformation for better informed decisions.

'I would be happy to know that there is someone who actually makes sure I can do this,' said Gori.

Watch the EDMO video

Don’t be an April Fool, Follow the Fact Checking Rules

Tommaso Canetta is deputy director of Pagella Politica, an Italian fact-checking outlet and co-ordinator of the fact-checking activities inside EDMO. To commemorate International Fact Checking Day on 2 April 2022, he shares his five top tips anyone can use for fact checking a piece of content they receive.

1. Breathe. Slow down before you reshare and take a moment to engage your critical thinking skills. Allow your fast-acting emotional response to pass.
2. Cross reference. Take the time to find a reference to the piece of news you are seeing from another source before passing it on. Use at least one trusted news provider and see if that piece of information is confirmed by other independent sources. If it’s coming from an obscure social media source, it may not be trustworthy.
3. Advanced searches are available. Many search engines have an image search facility where you can search a photograph or screenshot. Sometimes a piece of content purports to be one thing with immediate consequences, but with a quick search, you can find it’s from a totally different event in the past.
4. Go to a fact-checking site to see if it’s come to their attention. Some media organisations invest considerable effort into verification and provide all their sources so that you can validate their research for yourself. Fact checking services to consider include DW Fact Check, FRANCE24 Les Obervateurs, AFP Factcheck and EUvsDisinfo amongst others.
5. Remember, as a rule of thumb, if something is too good or too bad to be true, it probably is not true.

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More info

International Fact Checking Day, April 2, 2022

Digital strategy: European Digital Media Observatory

EDMO homepage