

Summary report of the public consultation on fake news and online disinformation

The public consultation took place between 13 November 2017 and 23 February 2018. The aim of the consultation was to help assess the effectiveness of current actions by market players and other stakeholders, the need for scaling them up and introducing new actions to address different types of fake news. This summary report takes stock of the contributions and presents preliminary trends that emerge from them. A synopsis report will be published in due course.

Objectives of the consultation

The consultation collected views from all parties concerned by fake news across the EU as regard the scope of the problem and the effectiveness of voluntary measures already put in place by industry to prevent the spread of disinformation online. The objective was also to better understand the rationale and possible directions for action at EU and/or national level.

Two questionnaires were available: one for the citizens and one for legal persons and journalists reflecting their professional experience of fake news and online disinformation.

Together with Eurobarometer results, and the report of the High Level group, the results of the public consultation will feed into the Commission Communication on fake news and online disinformation planned for spring 2018.

Who replied to the consultation?

The public consultation received a total of 2986 replies: 2784 from individuals and 202 from legal organisations. The largest number of replies came from Belgium, France, the United Kingdom, Italy and Spain. It is worth noting a high participation in Lithuania, Slovakia and Romania.

As regards non-individual replies, the largest proportion of respondents was private news media companies, followed by civil society organisations, other type of organisations, online platforms, research and academia and public authorities (national and local) and research and academia. Many respondents are active all around the world or in a large number of EU countries, including Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, Germany and the UK. At least ten entities from each Member State replied to the consultation. Sixty-nine news media organisations, fifty-one civil society organisations and sixteen online platforms replied.

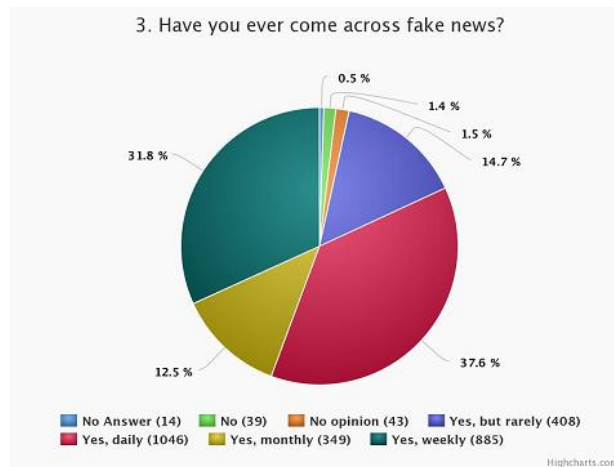
Preliminary findings of the public consultation for citizens

Without prejudice to the in-depth analysis of the replies to the public consultation, which will be presented in the synopsis report, the following overall preliminary trends can be observed:

- Views expressed throughout the questionnaire are mostly consistent and homogeneous amongst the respondents, independently of nationality or age group.
- The information channels used slightly vary according to the age of the respondents. Citizens above 50 have a lower use of social media for news (59%) than younger

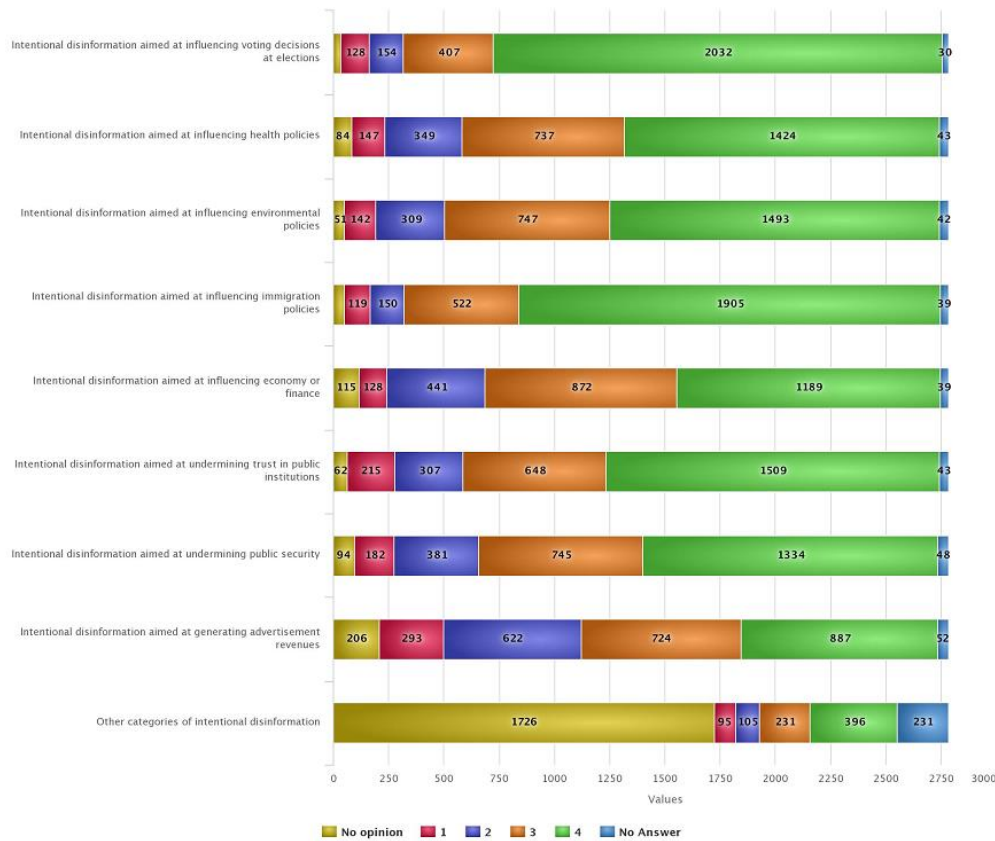
generations (72%) and a higher use of TV (59%) and radio (52%) against 30% and 30% respectively for people under 50.

- More than 99% of the respondents claim to have been confronted to fake news.



- For a majority of respondents, fake news are primarily circulated via social media, online blogs and online newspapers.
- The above results are likely to explain the trust of respondents in the different sources of information: the least trust is put in social media, online news aggregators and online blogs and websites and the most in traditional newspapers and magazines, specialised websites and online publications, news agencies and public agencies (overall with more than 70%). These results are also correlated to the way respondents mainly discern fake news from correct information: by comparing different news sources (90%), searching for the source (82%) or relying on media (70%) or journalists' reputation (55%).
- The perception is that the spread of fake news via social media is made easy because fake news appeal to readers' emotions (88%), are disseminated to orient the public debate (84%) and are conceived to generate revenues (65%). Moreover, respondents believe that news are shared without prior check (85%) or are not verified (80%) before being published.
- Respondents believe that *post factum* fact-checking is not seen as a solution by half of the respondents as it will not reach the people that saw the initial fake news.
- As regards to the areas mostly impacted by fake news, contributions received point at political affairs, immigration, minorities and security. Consequently, respondents believe that most harm is done on voting decisions and influencing immigration policies, undermining public institutions, followed by influencing environmental and health policies, public finance and security.

10. Are the following categories of fake news likely to cause harm to society? Please answer on a scale from 1 to 4; 1(no harm), 2 (not likely), 3 (likely) to 4 (highly likely).



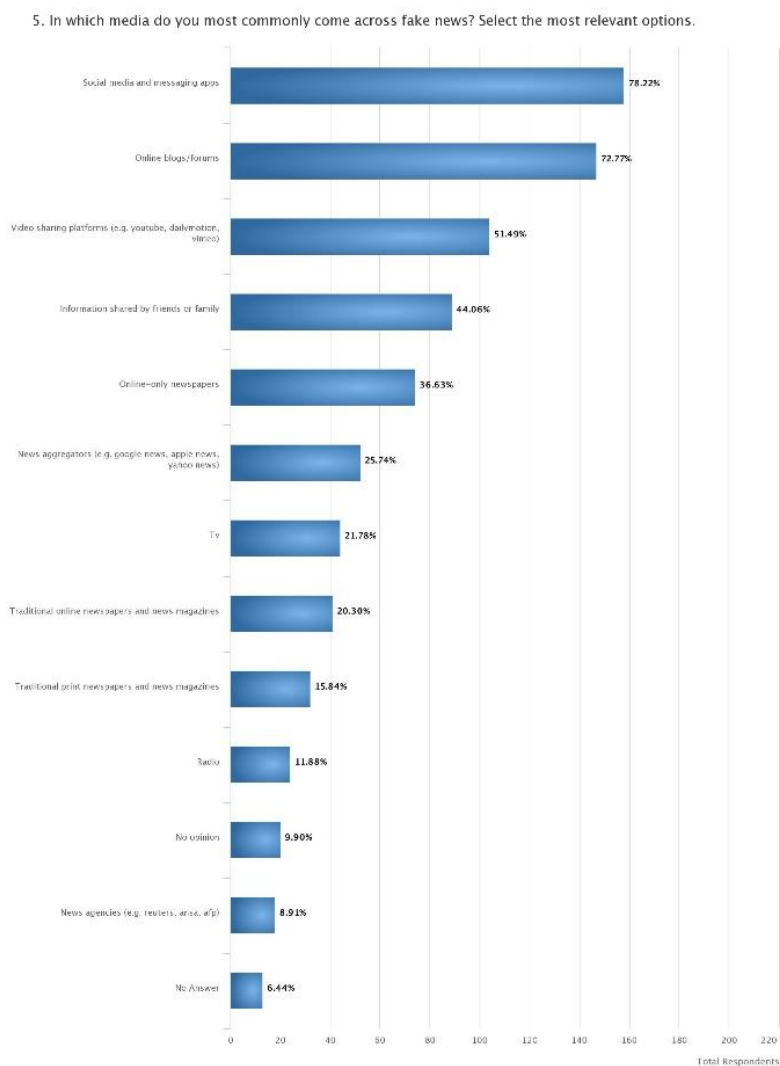
- Views are split as to whether measures taken to reduce the spread of fake news have had an impact: warnings, fact-checking, blocking and closing of fake accounts are seen as having a positive effect for a small majority of respondents. But social media are not considered to be doing enough.
- There is no clear consensus as to which measure taken by social media would be most effective in tackling fake news: information, education and empowerment of users prevail, followed closely by ranking, fact-checking and limitation of ads revenues. The same can be said for the measures to be taken by media organisations. Replies show a need for a multi-faceted approach to the phenomenon.
- Finally, replies to open questions indicate a clear concern for censorship that would limit the freedom of expression, and a significant wish for greater transparency, school education and media literacy.

Preliminary findings of the public consultation for legal entities

- Intentional disinformation aimed at influencing voting decisions at elections (75% of respondents) and immigration policies (74%) were the two top categories of fake news where most respondents thought fake news were **likely to cause harm** to society. Fake news aiming at undermining trust in public institutions (72%) and influencing health policies (71%) follow with almost similar results.
- The above results pretty much mirror the responses to the question about the areas which, in respondents' view, have been **targeted** by fake news during the last two years: Political affairs clearly tops the list, followed by immigration, health and security,

although in this case other topics such as environment and minorities were also put at the same level. The same goes for the areas where, in the view of responding organisations, public opinion has been **impacted** by fake news. Again, the categories of political affairs and immigration stand out, with almost two thirds of respondents saying that topics such as elections and refugees have been heavily targeted and that the impact of fake news has been strong.

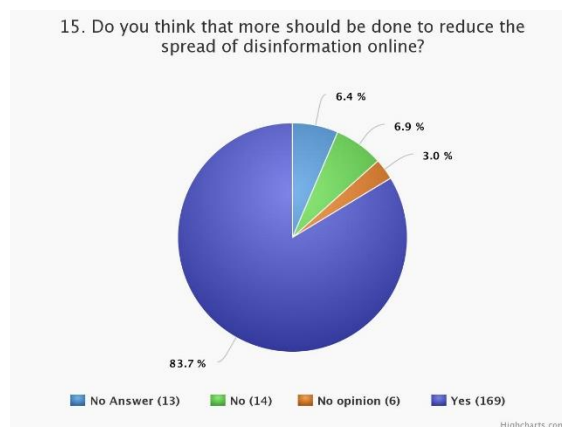
- Social media are by far seen the media by which organisations **come across fake news** (78% of respondents), closely followed by online blogs and forums (73%). Slightly more than half of respondents (51%) see video sharing platforms as the third main source of fake news, followed by friends or family (44%). More than one third of respondents (37%) declare to come across fake news through online-only newspapers, followed by news aggregators (26%). One fifth of respondents declare to find fake news in TV (22%), traditional media such as online newspapers and news magazines (20%) or print newspapers and news magazines (16%). Only 10% of respondents declare to come across fake news through the radio or news agencies (9%).



- Fact-checking through independent news organisations and civil society organisations (explaining why a post may be misleading) is perceived as the method that better contribute to **counter the spread of disinformation online** (54% of respondents see this as making a great or appreciable contribution). Half of respondents also think that the closing of fake accounts and the removal of

automated social media accounts, based on the platforms' code of conduct (50%), and mechanisms to block sponsored content from accounts that regularly post fake news (46%) have also helped to reduce the spread of fake news. Warnings to readers that a post or article has been flagged /disputed or mechanisms enabling readers to flag content that is misleading and/or fake are also positively seen by around four in ten respondents.

- Online platforms and news organisations were asked about the **tools** they use to **assess content** uploaded on their platforms or the quality of online information used to produce news. Fifty-five respondents mentioned fact checking done by human fact checkers, followed by peer reviews and flagging by trusted flaggers. Fewer respondents mentioned flagging by users.
- A large majority (74%) of respondents think **readers** are not sufficiently **aware of the steps** to take to verify veracity of news, when reading and sharing news online (e.g. check sources, compare sources, check whether claims are backed by facts, a result that points to the need to increase media literacy levels. Only 5% responded positively to this question.
- With regard to possible **future actions**, an overwhelmingly majority of respondents (84%) think that more should be done to reduce the spread of disinformation online.



- From a long list of **possible actions** that online platforms could take in order to prevent the spread of disinformation, 71% of respondents favour a further investment in educating and empowering users for better assessing and using online information. 69% supported the development of new forms of cooperation with media outlets, fact-checkers and civil society organisations to implement new approaches to counter fake news. 64% of respondents support the role of civil society organisations to improve monitoring and debunking of fake news. 61% of respondents supported ranking information from reliable sources higher and predominantly display it in search results or news feeds, as well as a limitation to advertisement revenues flowing to websites publishing fake news. 60% think a transparency measure such as informing users about the criteria and/or algorithms used to display content could also be effective.
- Interestingly, a more active role of online platforms end-users is not seen as having a significant impact in preventing the spread of fake news: 40% of respondents though that allowing more control to users on how to personalise the display of content would have low or no impact at all. Allowing direct flagging of suspicious content

between social media users is also not seen as a very promising action —36% expect low or no impact at all.

- News media organisations can, on their side, also take **actions to tackle fake news**. In this case the focus is on empowering users, either by helping readers to assess information when and where they read it —e. g. links to sources— (73% of respondents), or to develop media literacy skills to approach online news critically (70%).
- The possible added value of an **independent observatory** (linking platforms, news media organisations and fact-checking organisations) depends on the specific scope of such body: 54% of respondents support an independent observatory that acts like a knowledge centre, gathering studies and providing general advice on how to tackle disinformation online. Support declines if the scope of the observatory is narrowed down to asking fact-checkers to provide warnings about popular social media posts that need to be flagged (46%) or if it had to develop counter narratives when necessary (42%). However, the idea of an observatory is overall not rejected, with only 13% declaring that it would not be useful for the public.

Next steps

The Commission is now analysing in-depth the replies received. A synopsis report will be published in due course. The results will feed into the Communication on fake news and online disinformation to be adopted in spring 2018.