MARTIN FERTMANN AND MATTHIAS C. KETTEMANN (EDS.)

Viral Information

How States and Platforms Deal with Covid-19-Related Disinformation: an Exploratory Study of 20 Countries

„All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."

Art. 1, sentence 1, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948),

EU COST Action – CA19143 – Global Digital Human Rights

Viral Information

How States and Platforms Deal with Covid-19-Related Disinformation: an Exploratory Study of 20 Countries

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Foreword to the Working Paper Series

The Working Papers of the Global Digital Human Rights Network contain both an idealistic and a practice-oriented dimension. It is often difficult but always unavoidable for academia to reach out to the "real world". Scholars working with digital human rights have for some time realized that in the digital domain of human rights theory matters less and technical solutions matter more. The Working Paper series, again idealistically, attempt to reverse this pattern. The level of this goal's pragmatism depends on the Network's capability to break or at least question the strengthening grip of the online companies as powerful actors in defining the image of human rights in the digital landscape.

The current inaugural edition clearly shows how turbulent times accelerate the solidification of the novel "digital paradigm" in human rights protection. What during ordinary times could have taken decades may show itself as an important trend within a brief time due to the pandemic crisis. This means "normalization" of features which previously were considered contestable. For example, absence of transparency and foreseeability as inherent characteristics of private content governance has long been tacitly accepted because of the focus shift from the content assessment process to the outcome. But during difficult times, people expect answers and justification for decisions that impact how they can communicate.

The pandemic crisis has turned private platforms into even more powerful actors that largely set speech standards freely. Operation models of content governance are sometimes at odds with human rights principles developed by courts in and for the offline domain. This study saliently shows how the increased role of private platforms in crisis communication translates into daily decisions on what to delete and what not to delete. In doing so, platforms have become essential communicative actors in pandemic times. But do they enjoy the same level of legitimacy? How have they acted in different countries? What is their relation to states? Edited by Matthias C. Kettemann and Martin Fertmann at the Leibniz Institute for Media Research and based on submissions by COST Action participants from 20 countries, this first paper sets out to find answers. Many more will follow throughout the life-time of the COST Action.

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Executive Summary

– This study explores the spread of disinformation relating to the Covid-19 pandemic on the internet, dubbed by some as the pandemic's accompanying "infodemic," and the societal reactions to this development across different countries and platforms. The study's focus is on the role of states and platforms in combatting online disinformation.

– Through synthesizing answers to questions submitted by more than 40 researchers from 20 countries within the GDHR Network, this exploratory study provides a first overview of how states and platforms have dealt with Corona-related disinformation. This can also provide incentives for further rigorous studies of disinformation governance standards and their impact across different socio-cultural environments.

– Regarding the platforms' willingness and efficacy in removing (presumed) disinformation, a majority of submissions identifies a shift towards more intervention in pandemic times. Most submitters assess that this shift is widely welcomed in their respective countries and more often considered as taking place too slowly (rather than being perceived as entailing dangers for unjustified restrictions of freedom of expression). The picture is less clear when it comes to enforcing non-speech related infection prevention measures.

– While the dominant platforms have been able to defend, or even solidify, their position during the pandemic, communicative practices on those platforms are changing. For officials, this includes an increasing reliance on platforms, especially social networks, for communicating infection prevention rules and recommendations. For civil society, the pandemic has brought an increasing readiness – and perceived need – to intervene against disinformation, especially through fact-checking initiatives.

– National and local contexts show great variance at whether platform-driven disinformation is conceived as a societal problem. In countries where official sources are distrusted and/or seen as disseminating disinformation criticism against private information governance by platforms remains muted. In countries where official sources are trusted disinformation present on platforms is seen more negatively.

– While Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram play important roles in the pandemic communication environment, some replies point towards an increasing importance of messaging apps for the circulation of Covid-19-related disinformation. These apps, like Telegram or WhatsApp, tend to fall under the radar of researchers, because visibility of content is limited and scraping is difficult, and because they are not covered by Network Enforcement Act-type laws that usually exclude one-to-one communication platforms (even if they offer one-to-many channels).

– Vis-à-vis widespread calls for a (re)territorialization of their content governance standards and processes amid the pandemic, platform companies have maintained, by and large, global standards. Standardized, featured sections for national (health) authorities to distribute official information via platforms are exceptions thereto.

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Introduction

While the Covid-19 pandemic has forced schools, many jobs and most social interactions to go online, the transformative power of online communication is not a new phenomenon. Already in 2015, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) noted that the Internet "has now become one of the principal means by which individuals exercise their right to freedom to receive and impart information and ideas, providing [...] essential tools for participation in activities and discussions concerning political issues and issues of general interest."[1] A lot of this communication takes place in online settings that are ruled and regulated by private companies.

These rules are increasingly sophisticated but continue to be criticized widely for the opacity of their development, the arbitrariness of their application, and the non-plausibility of their execution. The general commitment of private actors to the Ruggie Principles as a "social license to operate"[2] often ends when economic questions become dominant. It is therefore essential to underline states' primary obligation to respect, protect and ensure human rights on and vis-à-vis private platforms,[3] coupled with a secondary obligation of companies to apply local law in light of international human rights standards.[4] As one of us put it:

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1 ECtHR, Cengiz and Others v. Turkey, 2015.

2 Human Rights Council, Protect, Respect and Remedy: a Framework for Business and Human Right. Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises, John Ruggie. A/HRC/8/5, 7 April 2008.

3 Art. 19 ICCPR, Art. 19 UDHR, Art. 10 ECHR, Art. 9 ACHR (Banjul Charter) and Art. 13 IACHR. See also Ingolf Pernice, Ó"Vom Völkerrecht des Netzes zur Verfassung des Internets – Privacy und Digitale Sicherheit im Zeichen eines schrittweisen Paradigmenwechsels", HIIG Discussion Paper Series No. 2017-02, 10 et seq.

4 Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)2 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the roles and responsibilities of internet intermediaries, adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 7 March 2018.

States have a duty to protect their citizens with regard to the internet (and regarding their online activities, including the exercise of freedom of expression). Companies, too, have a corporate social responsibility to respect human rights within their sphere of influence, which – on the internet – is growing rapidly as the majority of relevant communicative acts take place in private spaces. The special role of intermediaries is another challenge for regulating the internet. As the majority of online spaces lie in private hands, it is private law that prima facie frames many norm conflicts online. When states react belatedly through laws or judgments, these may lead to overblocking or legal conflicts between competing jurisdictions. This is why states, offline just as online, have both the negative obligation to refrain from violating the right to freedom of expression and other human rights in the digital environment, and the positive obligation to protect human rights and create an enabling and safe environment for everyone. Due to the horizontal effects of human rights, the positive obligation to protect includes a duty for states to protect individuals from the actions of private parties by making intermediaries comply with relevant legal and regulatory frameworks.[5]

This duty to protect becomes especially important in pandemic times. The possible effects of health-related disinformation in a global health emergency, but also the effects of measures taken to tackle such disinformation are raising the stakes in the ongoing, and largely open-ended, discussion. How and by whom should rules for online communication be formulated and enforced?

The study

How can we as researchers navigate the plethora of platforms, governance approaches, disinformation narratives and the respective societal contexts in such a volatile situation? We are convinced that this can only be achieved through collective scientific action. This study may therefore function as a proof of concept.

This study explores the spread of disinformation relating to the Covid-19 pandemic on the Internet, dubbed by some as the pandemic's accompanying "infodemic," and the societal reactions to this development across different countries and platforms. Its focus is on the role of states and platforms in combatting online disinformation.

Through synthesizing answers to twelve questions submitted by more than 40 researchers about 20 countries within the GDHR Network, this exploratory study provides a first overview of how states and platforms have dealt with Corona-related disinformation. This can also provide incentives for further rigorous studies of disinformation governance standards and their impact across different socio-cultural environments.

The individual submissions within this study are not intended to function as stand-alone, comprehensive assessments of the respective country. Rather, they function as pixels that collectively constitute a picture of the Covid-19 disinformation landscape.[6]

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[5] Wolfgang Benedek and Matthias C. Kettemann, Freedom of Expression and the Internet, 2nd edition, (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2020).

[6] Submissions were handed in between 7 October and 12 November 2020.

The results

The initial situation in terms of the popularity of digital platforms in the surveyed countries offers a largely homogenous picture: in almost all responses, Facebook and YouTube belong to the top five, accompanied mostly by Instagram and Twitter and sometimes by Pinterest and LinkedIn. The search engine Google and the messaging service WhatsApp are mentioned less often, but if so, they rank first or second on the list of platforms.[7] This finding most likely hints at different definitions of the term "platform," which in some instances appears to refer to social media services, while in other cases content intermediaries like Google and messaging services like WhatsApp are included as well. For supposedly similar reasons, popular national and regional news sites[8] as popular websites and "platforms for content" appear on some countries' top lists.

Said differentiation between (social media) platforms and messaging services appears to play an even more important role with regard to the spread of Corona-related (dis)information.[9] While Facebook and, to a slightly lesser extent, Twitter, Instagram and other popular platforms are nearly always mentioned as a spreading medium, some replies explicitly point towards an increasing importance of messaging apps in circulating Covid-related disinformation.[10] One report explicitly mentions the increasing practice of "chain-messaging via Viber and WhatsApp platforms, with disinformation about various aspects of the pandemic."[11] Adding to this, a reference from Israel argues that in the country "WhatsApp's groups are more dangerous in this time than public platforms such as Twitter, [as] the spreader identity provides credibility to the message delivered."[12] This is in line with a (non-representative) inquiry from Germany, arguing that the disinformation is published on content platforms like YouTube and spread via messaging or social networks like WhatsApp and Facebook.[13]

In terms of distribution channels, several submissions have also shown a shift from social networks towards – in terms of measures against disinformation – more lenient, if not indifferent, messaging services like Telegram and Viber.[14] It could be argued that groups/channels on such messaging platforms are on the rise as adversary (and non-observable) public fora internationally. This international notion also includes the *transnational* spread of certain disinformation, especially due to the common Russian language proficiency in Eastern Europe, as the example of Latvia shows: its submission details that "several fake news have also been distributed in Russian or have been translated from this language".[15]

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[7] Question 1, submissions from Germany, Israel, Spain, but also Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Portugal.

[8] E.g. Klix.ba and Avaz.ba in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ynet in Israel.

[9] However, it should be noted that most of the replies rely on qualitative assessments. Comprehensive empirical evidence on the differences between platforms/messengers in this regard is still missing, as specifically pointed out by the submissions to Question 2 from Albania, Cyprus, Germany, Israel, Latvia, Norway, and Serbia.

[10] Question 2, submissions from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Denmark, Germany, Israel, Latvia, Portugal, South Africa, and Spain.

[11] Question 2, submission from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Similarly, also the submission from Albania.

[12] Question 2, submission from Israel.

[13] Question 2, submission from Germany.

[14] Question 2, submissions from Germany and Latvia.

[15] Que stion 2, submission from Latvia.

The reported counter-measures against such disinformation generally belong to one of two categories: the first one concerns the platforms' own efforts to counter disinformation, e.g. labels for potentially harmful, misleading information on Twitter;[16] Covid-19-related content moderation rules on YouTube;[17] a WHO chat bot on WhatsApp;[18] and increased content moderation in cooperation with third-party fact-checkers on Facebook[19]. Those measures, however, are not country-specific and (apparently step-by-step[20]) applied without significant national differences – if differences in language and cooperating fact-checking organizations are left aside.[21] Of all surveyed countries, only South Africa appears to be an exception here, as "misinformation is removed in response to public outrage or the possibility of criminal prosecution rather than any measures imposed by the social media platforms themselves."[22]

Besides the platforms' own efforts, there have been notable examples of *external* initiatives to counter disinformation on platforms. One is a service to support journalists in verifying social network content: the platform called "Truly Media" was developed already before the pandemic, but has recently gained additional traction in Cyprus.[23] Another platform-external effort is a new bottom-up initiative to counter disinformation online: a regional central/south-eastern European consortium of fact-checking portals created its own public Viber Channel titled (translation) "Covid-19 Checked"[24] – thereby entering the area of direct messaging to counter disinformation. Apart from such single cases, governments and traditional news media have been named by many submissions as providers of specific initiatives against disinformation outside the platforms, but sometimes also as "trusted sources" in cooperation with social networks.[25]

In general, governments of all surveyed countries have urged the public to consume information about Covid-19 in a responsible manner and warned against the dangers of disinformation in social networks. While in most countries the administrations' argument refers to the danger for individual and public health, some warned against a threat to *public order* as such.[26] Beyond the governments' usual public relations outreach, several submissions describe the establishment of new governmental institutions to counter online disinformation during the pandemic, e.g. an anti-fake-news task-force in Italy or a special team at the Belgian police to search specifically for Covid-19-related disinformation.[27]

When it comes to public comments on the topic by politicians and other officials, the majority of reported statements include the importance of a careful handling of Covid-19-related information. However, they

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[16] See https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/product/2020/updating-our-approach-to-misleading-information.html.

[17] See https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/9891785?hl=en.

[18] See https://www.whatsapp.com/coronavirus/who/?lang=en.

[19] See https://www.facebook.com/formedia/blog/working-to-stop-misinformation-and-false-news.

[20] Cooperation for fact-checking on Facebook in Latvia and Estonia was only started this spring, see submission from Latvia to question 4.

[21] Question 3, submissions from Argentina, Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, Germany, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Portugal, Serbia, and Spain.

[22] See above question 3, submission from South Africa.

[23] See above question 3, submission from Cyprus.

[24] See above question 3, submission from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

[25] See above question 3, submissions from Belgium, Finland, Israel, Latvia, and Norway.

[26] Question 4, submissions from Germany and Israel.

[27] Question 4, submission from Italy, and questions 4 and 5, submission from Belgium.

do not elaborate on potential sources for the disinformation. If those are mentioned, the diagnosis is inconsistent: while some argue there was no "organized disinformation, rather more emotion-driven circulation of false information,"[28] in other cases the involvement of foreign actors is at least implied.[29] Similarly inconsistent is their attribution of responsibility for a proper handling of disinformation. On the one hand, politicians "expect social networks to live up to their responsibility,"[30] on the other hand, they emphasize that "the main emphasis is precisely on individual responsibility and not one of the platforms."[31]

Besides the abstract mentioning of Covid-19-related disinformation, some officials explicitly responded to certain content, for example the conspiracy theory that Covid-19 was caused or spread by 5G mobile communication technology or that potential vaccinations were intended to implant subdermal microchips.[32] Such and similar conspiracies occur in many of the surveyed countries,[33] often including certain "perpetrators" or "scapegoats" on which the pandemic is blamed. Most common in this regard is the idea that Bill Gates was "behind" Covid-19. [34] Likewise prevailing is the notion that the virus was a biological weapon developed by China or the US.[35]

In addition to such theories of the *origin* of Covid-19, the pandemic is used to foster existing prejudices against minorities and already vulnerable societal groups – including Jews,[36] Asians,[37] and migrants.[38] Equally notable is the reported prejudice mentioned in the reports from Lithuania and Serbia that Covid-19 was spread by NATO troops stationed in the respective country.[39]

Court decisions on the removal of Covid-19-related content were not available to all researchers. This might also be due to the impact the pandemic had on court proceedings.[40] However, information concerning criminal proceedings against users was available in multiple countries. In that regard, contributions reflect different national approaches to governing speech online: while there is a group of countries in which individual users have been prosecuted for spreading "fake news" as a misdemeanor under the respective national criminal law,[41] reported criminal proceedings in other countries are limited to violations of social

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[28] Referring to spring and summer of 2020, see Question 4, submission from Latvia.

[29] Question 4, submissions from Germany and Norway.

[30] Question 4, submission from Germany; similarly, the Latvian President Egils Levits quoted in the submission from Latvia.

[31] Question 4, submission from Latvia.

[32] Question 4, submissions from Israel and Lithuania.

[33] For 5G, see Question 6, submissions from Argentina, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lithuania, Serbia, and Spain. For micro-chipping, see the respective submissions from Albania and South Africa.

[34] Question 6, submissions from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Serbia, South Africa, and Spain.

[35] Question 6, submissions from Latvia, Norway, and South Africa.

[36] Question 6, submissions from Albania and Germany.

[37] Question 6, submissions from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, Germany, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Portugal (a).

[38] Question 6, submissions from Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Denmark, Germany, Italy, and Serbia.

[39] Question 6, submissions from Lithuania and Serbia.

[40] Question 7, submission from Albania.

[41] Question 7, submissions from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Israel, and Serbia.

distancing rules offline,[42] documentations of such violations in content posted online[43] or cases of online-incitement to commit offline-violations (such as to attend prohibited protests).[44]

Overall, it seems the pandemic has not (yet) reframed the way private actors are conceived of as potential enforcers of public rules. On the one hand, the enforcement of mask-wearing obligations by railway companies was debated in three countries,[45] and shopkeepers and education institutions were widely obliged to ensure mask-wearing and social distancing rules within their respective spaces.[46] However, as for the broader discussion on private enforcement of public rules, participating countries are both individually and collectively far away from a consensus whether private actors, be they railway companies, shopkeepers or online platforms, should or should not "play policeman".[47]

Across all submitting countries, online platforms have been used to disseminate governmental or municipal restrictions and suggestions pertaining to Covid-19,[48] underlining the importance platforms such as Facebook or Twitter have for communicating governmental information.

The use of these platforms seems to focus on spreading easy-to-access overviews of rules and suggestions,[49] likely in response to the complexity and volatility of infection prevention rules and suggestions: in the pandemic, platforms seem to become increasingly crucial spaces to receive information about changes to (infection prevention) rules and, perhaps even more importantly, to receive information that helps to make sense of the fast-changing letter of the law. In this respect, governmental entities have in two submitting countries formed new alliances with social media influencers as a means to convey accessible Covid-19-related information.[50]

According to the submitting researchers' individual, qualitative assessments, the role of platforms in dealing with Covid-19-related discourses/disinformation has not (yet) significantly impacted the way these platforms are considered. Although some submissions point to an increasing public awareness regarding issues such as Covid-19 disinformation,[51] most of those assert, in one form or another, that "it does not appear (for now) that (…) Covid-19-related disinformation has impacted public opinion regarding the role

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[42] Question 7, submission from Belgium.

[43] Question 7, submission from Spain.

[44] Question 7, submission from Germany.

[45] Question 7, submissions from Belgium, Germany, Israel, and Italy.

[46] Question 7, submissions from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Israel,

[47] Question 7, submission from Belgium, quoting former Belgian Prime Minister Sophie Wilmès saying Shopkeepers "Shouldn't play policeman", from Rik Arnoudt, 'Mondmaskerplicht in Winkels: "We Rekenen Op Gezond Verstand van de Mensen", Zegt Premier Wilmès' *VRT NWS* (10 July 2020); see also Question 7, Submission from Italy.

[48] Question 9, all submissions; Question 11, submission from Albania cites criticism of the Albanian Prime Minister's overly intensive use of Facebook as a means of communication opposed to other traditional forms of governmental communication.

[49] Question 9, submission from Belgium.

[50] Question 9, submissions from Belgium and Finland, Question 12, submission from Finland.

[51] Question 10, submissions from Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Denmark, Germany, Israel, Serbia, and Spain; with the submissions from Belgium and Spain, pointing to statistical evidence for this development.

of platforms (...)",[52] assessing that any current debate's "focus is usually on specific instances of moderation decisions, (...) and a wider or a more systematic reconsideration of the role of platforms is lacking."[53]

Assessments regarding the question whether platforms have dealt with Covid-19-related discourses and disinformation sensibly vary: some submissions assert that platforms have done rather well in striking the necessary balance between respecting freedom of expression and necessary intervention,[54] while other researchers fear that the platforms' removal of Covid-19-related content might be a gateway to overly invasive content moderation practices in general.[55]

The importance attached to the problems of private content moderation seems to vary due to differences in perceived reliability or trustworthiness of other, official information about the spread of Covid-19: where official information on Covid-19 is scarce, addressing this scarcity is considered as a more pressing step (than private intervention) towards limiting the spread of disinformation.[56] Moreover, contributions underscore the need for further research into the pandemic's effect on private content moderation practices.[57] Overall, responses to the question whether platforms dealt with the issue sensibly were positive. In most states, platforms succeeded in providing access to authoritative information on the pandemic.[58] Covid-19-related moderation in some cases even led to positive spillover effects on moderation practices regarding hate speech.[59] The interplay of information provided by states, traditional media outlets and platforms is explicitly mentioned as fruitful in combating disinformation in some cases.[60]

Some submissions, however, point out inadequacies in the moderation of disinformation on platforms.[61] This relates to inadequate expertise and insufficient staffing,[62] lack of effort,[63] lack of a country-tailored approach,[64] missing interlinkage with reliable official sources,[65] and unclear duties of platforms.[66] The main challenges identified in some countries relate to ensuring the authenticity of information on platforms,[67]

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[52] Question 10, submission from Belgium.

[53] Question 10, submission from Bosnia and Herzegovina; similar assessments can be found in Question 10, submissions from Germany, Italy, and Serbia.

[54] Question 11, submissions from Albania and Germany,

[55] Question 11, submission from Denmark.

[56] Question 11, submission from Serbia; also reflected in Question 12, submissions from Croatia and Lithuania.

[57] Question 11, submissions from Germany and Spain.

[58] Question 11, submissions from Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Estonia, Germany, Italy, Latvia, and Lithuania.

[59] Question 11, submission from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

[60] Question 11, submissions from Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Norway.

[61] Question 11, submissions from Albania, Estonia, Israel, Portugal, Serbia, South Africa, and Spain.

[62] Question 11, submission from Albania.

[63] Question 11, submissions from Israel and South Africa.

[64] Question 11, submission from Portugal.

[65] Question 11, submission from Serbia.

[66] Question 11, submission from Spain.

[67] Question 11, submission from Albania.

the misuse of disinformation on the pandemic as a tool for party politics,[68] and a lack of private-public cooperation in the combat of disinformation, for example when content flagged as disinformation by officials was only removed by platforms in 50% of the cases.[69] The Portuguese submission suggests, instead of removal, a real-time fact-checking system that uses a color scheme to classify information – "green for OK, yellow for unchecked, and red for confirmed 'fake news'". In addition, the interests behind content should be made transparent, e.g., on the funding of the respective sites.[70] A challenge to such a system could be, as pointed out in another submission, conflicting statements from experts and investigative journalists and inadequacies of the official information system.[71]

Recommendations

There are some common denominators to be identified in the recommendations on the roles of state authorities, companies/platforms, and civil society. One of these denominators is the need for more efforts regarding active information and transparency: states should act more transparently themselves regarding their emergency measures and reasons therefore and communicate accurately, timely and responsibly.[72] To be able to do so in a credible manner, the quality of the underlying emergency legislation is important, as contradictory norms result in contradictory governmental communication.[73] Another common denominator is a call for active cooperation of states, platforms and civil society. One concrete recommendation in this regard is the establishment of contact points in every country that coordinate cooperation.[74] Critical information on (seemingly) divisive topics, such as purchasing agreements for vaccines in the present climate, should be communicated particularly transparently by governments.[75]

States should actively use platforms in their efforts, according to some of the recommendations.[76] One submission calls for positive incentives provided by the state for platforms to prioritize "truth" instead of profits.[77] Others point towards a need for restraint from the state when trying to legislate against the spread of disinformation in order not to harm freedom of expression.[78] When considering legislative action, some contributions call for specific national regulation of social media platforms,[79] while the contribution from

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[68] Question 11, submissions from Albania and Argentina; Question 12, submission from Argentina.

[69] Question 11, submission from Belgium.

[70] Question 11, submission from Portugal.

[71] Question 11, submission from Serbia.

[72] Question 12, submissions from Albania, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Israel, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, Serbia, and South Africa.

[73] Question 12, submission from South Africa.

[74] Question 12, submission from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

[75] Question 12, submission from Norway.

[76] Question 12, submissions from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Finland, and Latvia,

[77] Question 12, submission from Belgium.

[78] Question 12, submission from Denmark.

[79] Question 12, submissions from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, and Spain.

Germany, where such regulation is already in place, underlines the need to assess the possible adverse impacts of this legislation (NetzDG) during the pandemic.[80]

Researchers recommend that platforms continue their efforts in enhancing access to reliable information[81] as well as in removing disinformation.[82] A number of contributions underline the need for platforms to more transparently communicate the extent in which Covid-19- related disinformation is removed.[83] Recommended new models include the establishment of co-regulatory measures on a country-by-country basis.[84] This would represent a paradigm shift, considering the fact that platforms have, so far, succeeded in ensuring the opposite: the submissions show that the nationalization of platforms' responses to Covid-19-related disinformation is limited to fairly narrow, globally rolled-out "docking sites" for national authorities within their platforms (e.g. featured spaces for health authorities or access to chatbot-channels).[85]

There is a broad consensus within the submissions that platforms should actively and transparently check content to prevent disinformation and provide access to reliable information.[86] To do so effectively, they should not merely rely on algorithms, but use sufficient human moderators and provide adequate funding.[87] One part of the recommendations explicitly calls for *self*-regulation of platforms in this regard.[88] Platforms should moderate bearing in mind their users' right to freedom of expression and avoid the impression of censorship.[89] There is no clear preference for either deletion or flagging of content conveying disinformation.[90] Algorithmic content classification should be further developed to be able to take context into account.[91]

Public/private collaborations for spreading official information are contextualized in significantly different ways across submissions. While the Finnish submission evaluates the national authority's approach to collaborate with influencers as multipliers for reliable information as an efficient way to combat disinformation,[92] the German submission focuses on the dangers for misuse of platforms' power to magnify governmental information. It explicitly calls for limiting such governmental use of platforms to the ongoing health crisis. It can be concluded that this should hold true also for other, comparable crises.[93]

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[80] Question 7, submission from Germany.

[81] Question 12, submissions from Argentina and Belgium

[82] Question 12, submissions from Argentina and Belgium

[83] Question 12, submissions from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Germany, Israel, Italy, Lithuania, and Portugal (a).

[84] Question 12, submission from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

[85] Question 3, submissions from Albania, Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Israel, and Italy.

[86] Question 12, submissions from Albania, Argentina, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, Finland, Portugal, Serbia, and Spain.

[87] Question 12, submissions from Albania and Belgium.

[88] Question 12, submissions from Cyprus, Portugal, and Serbia.

[89] Question 12, submissions from Argentina and Latvia,

[90] There are, however, some recommendations that clearly favour flagging over removing: Question 12, submissions from Norway and Latvia.

[91] Question 12, submissions from South Africa and Spain.

[92] Question 12, submission from Finland.

[93] Question 12, submission from Germany.

The (present and future) role of civil society is mainly portrayed as a provider of (social) media literacy, multiplier of reliable information, factchecker, flagger of disinformation, and watchdog keeping in check platforms and governments.[94]

Concluding from the above observations and recommendations, the present health and information crisis has led to broad common understandings in many aspects. Lawmaking, political communication, the creation of information and the power structures behind it, and the moderation of content ought to be more transparent – with or without a crisis. However, the statements we analyzed in this study also highlight some of the disputed territories of (social) media regulation in Europe. The underlying questions about the existence of objectifiable truth (as opposed to "fake news"), the danger of opening Pandora's box of governmental control over platforms as private entities used to disseminate this unclear "truth", and the danger of encouraging overbroad content governance by private actors are among the most pressing of these questions. These potential negative impacts on human rights might also explain the preference of some commentators to remain within the boundaries of platform self-regulation and not to overstress state's responsibilities. Some submissions, on the other hand, show an openness for more government intervention and regulation – a development that is well underway during the Covid-19-pandemic. The nature and exact scope of the related national norm-making if implemented, together with the harmonization efforts at the EU level, will play a key role in the shaping of the post-pandemic information society.

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[94] Question 12, submissions from Argentina, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, South Africa, and Spain.

Contributions by Question and Country

Question 1: What are the five most popular platforms (by daily active users) in your country?

Albania

Following the study conducted by Open Society Foundation for Albania (OSFA) in 2018 on the 'Landscape of Online Media in Albania', data showed that Albanians tend to turn to traditional media for reliable information, although online media have gained more ground recently. According to Google Trends, the 20 most searched words by Albanians in Google in 2017 included: Facebook, YouTube, Google, newspapers, panorama, Instagram, tema and lajmifundit, which shows a high interest in social media and online media. It is worth noting that the OSFA study of 2018, makes reference to one of the very few surveys on media usage by the public conducted back in 2014, which states that: 73% of respondents said they trusted information from TV, compared to 43% who believed in radio and the press, and 46 % who believed in online media. According to the same study, 89% of Albanians said they watch TV every day, compared to 42% for the internet and 25% for the press. In addition, when asked regarding the main source of information for political news, 84% of the respondents cited television as the main source of information.[95]

The interview with Mr. Llazar Semini led to the following ranking of the most popular online platforms: Balkanweb, shqiptarja.com, panorama, Top-channel tv, exit.com.[96] However, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Tweeter are also commonly used platforms in Albania.

Argentina

Facebook, Twitter, Google, YouTube & Whatsapp

Belgium

In Belgium - due to its state structure -, relevant numbers often exist on a regional rather than on a national level.[97] In particular, information concerning daily users appears to be available only at regional level (Flanders).

Daily social media usage for Flanders = Facebook (64%), Instagram (30%), YouTube (25%), Twitter (10%), Linkedin and Pinterest (5%).[98] These percentages relate to a study of a representative sample of Flemish

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[95] Open Society Foundation. (2018) LANDSCAPE OF ONLINE MEDIA IN ALBANIA - Survey with online media.

Available at: https://www.osfa.al/sites/default/files/peizash_i_medias_online.pdf.

[96] Ll. Semini Interview (LLazar Semini is correspondent to the Associated Press. Mr. Semini consulted his colleagues at the Albanian Media Institute and Authority for Audio-visual media)

97 'Social Media Usage in Belgium - Statistics & Facts' (Statista) <https://www.statista.com/topics/5525/social-media-in-belgium/#:~:text=Nonetheless%2C%20Facebook%20Messenger%20is%20the,%2C%20Snapchat%2C%20iMessage%20and%20Skype>.

98 Karel Vandendriessche and Lieven De Marez, 'Imec.Digimeter 2019' 38 <https://www.imec.be/nl/expertises/imec-digimeter/digimeter-2019>.

2.754 media users. Messenger apps such as Whatsapp are also very popular but only montly usage numbers are available, for Whatsapp this is 72%.

Daily usage for Wallonia = not found

Monthly usage for Belgium (internet users between 16 to 64) = Facebook (80%), YouTube (79%), Facebook Messenger (68%), Whatsapp (60%), Instagram (50%).[99]

Bosnia and Herzegovina

According to Amazon's Alexa, [100] the five most popular platforms, by daily active users in Bosnia and Herzegovina are as follows: 1. Google.com 2. YouTube.com 3. Avaz.ba 4. Klix.ba 5. Facebook.com Out of these the five most popular, two are local news portals that have country-wide audience (klix.ba and avaz.ba). Avaz.ba is one of the oldest daily newspapers (some of its content qualified as tabloid journalism) in the country, which started as a print version – Dnevni avaz, still published since 1995, and with an online version, enabling free access to a part of its content, but also a subscription option for additional content via Avaz Digital. Both avaz.ba and klix.ba have their official accounts on all social media platforms.[101]

Croatia

Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber, YouTube (based on my assessment)

Cyprus

Facebook/ Instagram/ Twitter/ YouTube/ Linkedin It should be noticed that Cyprus has a population of just 1.19 million (February 2019) and 1.01 million are internet users. The number of social media users in Cyprus accessing sites via a mobile is 920,000 which is 77% of the population.[102]

Denmark

Facebook 63%, YouTube 26%, Instagram 25%, Snapchat 24%, LinkedIn 7%

Estonia

Google, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn.[103] – English language and Estonian. Only Estonian language: Delfi.ee, Postimees.ee, err.ee, epl.ee

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99 'Digital 2020: Belgium' (Datareportal) <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-belgium> slide 43.

100 https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/BA, accessed on 5 October 2020. information avaialble about the following categories: Daily Time on Site, Daily Pageviews per Visitor, % of Traffic From Search, and Total Sites Linking in

101 Facebook accounts: https://www.facebook.com/dnevniavaz, https://www.facebook.com/Klix.ba

102 https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-cyprus
https://contentworks.agency/social-media-in-cyprus-the-stats-you-need-to-know/

103 https://milos.ee/suur-uuring-eestlaste-interneti-ja-sotsiaalmeedia-kasutus-aastal-2020/ (2020 study, referring to data from We Are Social and Hootsuite).

Finland

In social media most popular platforms are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pintarest, YouTube. Regarding digital platforms in general Facebook, Twitter, Iltalehti, Iltasanomat and Suomi 24.

Germany

1. WhatsApp, 2. Google, 3. YouTube, 4. Facebook, 5. Instagram.[104]

Israel

1. WhatsApp, 2. Google, 3. YouTube, 4. Facebook, 5. Ynet (local site).[105]

Surveys show a rise in usage of social media during Covid-19.[106]

Italy

According to one of the most referred statistics by Italian social media experts, the most used social media in Italy are the following (data related to the year 2019):

Social Media Monthly users in Italy

1. YouTube 36.100.000, 2. Facebook 35.900.000, 3. Instagram 27.000.000, 4. LinkedIn 18.700.000, 5. Pinterest 16.600.000

Statistics show that while Twitter is in the sixth position, with 10.200.000 users, TikTok has surged rapidly in the last months, so it is likely that with more recent data it will be included in the top-five, excluding another platform.[107]

According to another source[108] the statistics of market share show different users count but the same social platforms

1. Facebook, 2. Pinterest, 3. Twitter, 4. Instagram, 5. YouTube

Latvia

There are no recent statistics regarding the most popular platforms in Latvia. However, following the independent researcher's data from May, the most popular social networks in Latvia were Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, Snapchat, Pinterest.[109] At the same time, it must be noted that this survey

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104 Die Medienanstalten (2020) Intermediäre und Meinungsbildung. Mediengewichtungsstudie 2019-II, https://www.die-medienanstalten.de/fileadmin/user_upload/die_medienanstalten/Themen/Forschung/Intermediaere_und_Meinungsbildung/Intermediaere_Meinungsbildung_2019-2.pdf, 9.

105 https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/israel/

106 https://www.jpost.com/jpost-tech/internet-usage-in-israel-spikes-amid-coronavirus-pandemic-study-finds-637713

107 http://www.audiweb.it/, https://vincos.it/2020/02/27/social-media-in-italia-utenti-e-tempo-di-utilizzo-nel-2019/

108 https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/italy

109 https://infinitum.agency/blog/aptaujas-rezultatu-apkopojums-ka-mainijusies-latvijas-iedzivotaju-socialo-tiklu-lietosanas-paradumi-covid-19-izplatibas-laika/

did not include the common communication platforms, such as WhatsApp, Telegram and Signal. Older data shows that already in 2018 WhatsApp was used by 85 per cent of the responders[110]; thus, it could also be one of the TOP 5 platforms in Latvia.

Lithuania

1) Facebook, 2) Pinterest, 3) YouTube, 4) Instagram, 5) Twitter (Social Media Stats in Lithuania - September 2020[111]). According to a survey conducted by "Synopticum", in April 2020, 46% of users said that the time they spent in social media increased during the lockdown. Yet social media were not the main source of news regarding Covid-19. The main source of such information were news portals (for 39 % of users) followed by TV (30%) and social media (17%). For women, social media were on the second place after TV. 46% of respondents did not consider information on Covid-19 posted on social media to be reliable whereas 43% considered it reliable.[112]

Data of one of the leading mobile network operators, "Bitė", show that after the end of lockdown in mid-June, the use of Facebook and YouTube dropped below the pre-lockdown levels.[113] However, in August and September, according to "Bitė", Facebook has reached the peak of its use this year and is a clear leader in Lithuania. The use of "Instagram" has dropped by 30% compared to the peak of the pandemic in April as a portion of its users possibly migrated to "TikTok" which is the leader in the increase of data flow. Popularity of conversation platforms ("Zoom, "Messenger", "WhatsApp", "Viber", etc.) has grown. The flow of data to serve them has increased by 480%.

After the lockdown (which lasted from mid-March to mid-June) their use diminished but still remains higher than prior to the lockdown. Data flow to serve "Microsoft Teams" in September was 90% higher than before the lockdown.[114]. In 2018 a survey was conducted to compare the statistics of social media sites where people have accounts to social media accounts that are actually used. The biggest number of accounts was on 1) Facebook, 2) Google+, 3) YouTube, 4) Viber, 5) Instagram but according to the actual use the list was 1) Facebook, 2) YouTube, 3) Instagram, 4) Google +, 5) Viber.[115]

Moldova

Social Media Stats for Republic of Moldova during Sept 2019 – Sept 2020[116]:

110 https://littlebit.inspired.lv/socialo-tiklu-lietosanas-paradumi-baltijas-valstis/

111 https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/lithuania

112 Karantino metu lietuviai socialiniuose tinkluose naršo dažniau: didžiausias dėmesys – Covid-19 naujienoms, 30/04/2020, https://www.delfi.lt/m360/naujausi-straipsniai/karantino-metu-lietuviai-socialiniuose-tinkluose-narso-dazniau-didziausias-demesys-covid-19-naujienoms.d?id=84173917

113 S. Jakučionis, Operatoriai apibendrino, kaip keitėsi vartotojų įpročiai per pandemiją, 16/07/2020, https://www.15min.lt/verslas/naujiena/bendroves/operatoriai-apibendrino-kaip-keitesi-vartotoju-iprociai-per-pandemija-663-1345466

114 Bitė", Internetas po karantino: "TikTok" naudojimas – nestoja, "Zoom" – krenta, 05/10/2020, https://www.bite.lt/apie/ziniasklaidai/internetas-po-karantino-tiktok-naudojimas-nestoja-zoom-krenta

115 Gemius Baltic, Kiek žmonių iš tiesų naudojasi socialiniais tinklais?, 2019-01-18, https://www.gemius.lt/visos-naujienos/kiek-zmoniu-lietuvoje-is-tiesu-naudojasi-socialiniais-tinklais.html

116 https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/moldova/#monthly-201909-202009

I) Facebook: 84,15 %; II) Pinterest: 8,11 %; III) YouTube: 4,07 %; IV) Instagram: 1,15 %; V) Twitter: 0,99%; VI) VKontakte: 0,96 %

Norway[117]

The most popular Websites are YouTube, Facebook, VG.no, NRK.no, Netflix.no[118] VG.no is the online site of a national newspaper. NRK (Norsk Rikskringkastning) is the site of the state broadcaster, whose original medium was television. The most popular social media platforms are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest and YouTube.[119]

Portugal (a)

Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Whatsapp, Linkedin.[120]

Serbia

1.Facebook; 2. Instagram; 3. YouTube; 4. Twitter; 5. LinkedIn[121]

South Africa

Whatsapp; YouTube; Facebook (incl. Facebook Messenger); Instagram; Twitter[122]

Spain

Based on the study *Digital situation, Internet and social networks Spain 2020*[123], it must be taken into account that Spain has 46.75 million inhabitants, 80% of them living in urbanized areas. There are 54.11 million mobile connections, which means 116% compared to the total population, and the total number of Internet users is 42.40 million, meaning that 91% of the population has access to the service. Users of social networks represent 29 million, which means that 62% of Spaniards use them. Five networks are the most common in

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117 The contributors acknowledge the excellent research assistance for their submission by Marthe Emilie Kielland Røssaak, research assistant at the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights, University of Oslo.

118 Datareportal: Digital 2020: Norway https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-norway.

119 Social Media Stats Worldwide: Norway https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats.

120 https://www.marketinglovers.pro/as-redes-sociais-mais-usadas-em-portugal/; https://4gnews.pt/redes-sociais-mais-usadas/

121 Pioniri, https://pioniri.com/sr/socialserbia2019/

122 NB: Regarding the definition of the category 'platforms', we decided to include any websites or applications which involve peer-to-peer content sharing. It remains difficult in general to obtain accurate daily active user metrics for websites. There are several organisations who research such metrics, using different methodologies. One source based on data from various organisations is: https://www.talkwalker.com/blog/social-media-stats-south-africa

123 Yi Min Shun Xiz. (2020) Social Media, Marketing, Seo, Marca personal. From Similar web. Study of the digital situation, internet and social networks Spain, January 2020. Retrieved from https://yiminshum.com/social-media-espana-2020/

Spain, by order: YouTube with 89% (Salaverría[124],2019; AIMC, 2019[125]; Yi Min Shun Xiz[126], 2020; Epdata, 2020[127]), Whatsapp with 86% (declared as active users) (Salaverría, 2019 and Yi Min Shun Xiz, 2020), Facebook with 79%, Instagram with 65%, Twitter with 53% (declared as active users). Consideration could also be given to other smaller cases, such as Pinterest or Linkedin (AIMC, Epdata, 2020).

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124 Salaverría et al. (2019) Disinformation in times of pandemia: typology of hoax about Covid-19, Retrieved from https://recyt.fecyt.es/index.php/EPI/article/view/epi.2020.may.15/50027

125 Web browsers (2019) AIMC. (pages 72-73) Source: http://download.aimc.es/aimc/Rub9aYt/macro2019c/#page=72

126 Yi Min Shun Xiz. (2020) Social Media, Marketing, Seo, Marca personal. From Similarweb. Study of the digital situation, internet and social networks Spain, January 2020. Retrieved from https://yiminshum.com/social-media-espana-2020/

127 Epdata.es. Redes sociales más usadas por los españoles. Retrieved from https://www.epdata.es/datos/usuarios-redes-sociales-espana-estudio-iab/382

Question 2: Were certain platforms or types of platforms (like messengers) in your country more affected by Covid-19-related disinformation than others? If yes, please name them and indicate a source

Albania

There are no clear-cut scientific studies in this regard. Fake news is spread via online platforms (mainly Facebook and WhatsApp), but also via traditional media.

A local fact-checking news site regularly puts forward cases, mainly concerning the government not keeping pledges.[128] Regarding Covid-19, the Faktoje.al, a news fact-checking portal points out to the disinformation circulating in the Albanian online media but also in various TV programs. The so-called "folk doctors" with a relatively high number of audiences/followers on social networks, especially Facebook, have been for several months pushing forward their own "campaign" offering supposedly cures for Covid-19 treatment.[129]

"I have cured a family … it is merely a flu, it will disappear with the arrival of the summer" – interview with a Folk Doctor[5] on one of the most popular TV programs in Albania on May 8, 2020.[130] On 14 July 2020, the police arrested two persons who through the social network "Facebook" called for the production of substances for the treatment of Covid-19 virus from a mixture of hydrochloric acid with water.

In an interview with Fax News, Altin Goxhaj (Lawyer) argued that if someone dies of Covid-19 the state takes over the funeral ceremony, which on itself raises suspicions. According to the him, from unconfirmed data, it results that the state is paid around EUR 16-18 million and this has led to an increase in figures. He claims that the numbers are being manipulated because the government makes profit out of it.[131]

On the social network "WhatsApp" circulated a text message[132] which stated "the Ministry of Health has approved an immediate reward of EUR 350, for those who stay at home", which was accompanied by a link. In fact, this "information" was denied by the Minister of Health and Social Protection, while the link was a "trap" that led nowhere.[133]

Argentina

Google, Facebook and Twitter

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128 https://faktoje.al/?s=covid

129 "Mjekët popullorë", mitet dhe dilemat që po shoqërojnë pandeminë Covid-19, https://faktoje.al/mjeketpopullore-mitet-dhe-dilemat-qe-po-shoqerojne-pandemine-covid-19/ 5 Ruzhdi Metali, Folk doctor, has a facebook page with 34k followers.

130 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cj71Af053O0&feature=youtu.be

131 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hppxKTkKDWY&feature=youtu.be

132 See also: https://faktoje.al/kura-e-sherimit-te-covid-19-me-sode-dhe-limon-fake-news/

133 Infodemi në kohën e pandemisë koronavirus "Covid-19" https://faktoje.al/infodemi-ne-kohen-e-pandemisekoronavirus-covid-19/, http://kryeministria.al/

Belgium

Sources concerning online disinformation in Belgium mostly refer to Facebook, Twitter and Whatsapp as being the platforms affected by Covid-19-related disinformation.[134] None of the three seems specifically more affected than the others.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The beginning of the pandemic saw increased chain-messaging via Viber and WhatsApp platforms, with disinformation about various aspects of the pandemic, including advice by real or imaginary doctors from foreign countries on how the spread of the virus can be prevented.[135] In addition, there was a lot of targeting of persons with who were reported as early positive cases, with false news about their irresponsible behaviour that caused the spread of the virus. For example, a woman who returned from Italy with her family in the end of February, when World Health Organisation declared world pandemic, was a subject of false reporting, when the most popular daily newspaper in BiH *Dnevni avaz* carried the information about her going to a concert attended by 500 people and using public transport while infected.[136] Furthermore, social media platforms, Facebook in particular, were affected by the spread of disinformation published on personal accounts managed by both private and public persons with thousands of likes and shares in a matter of minutes. The disinformation mostly pertained to various conspiracy theories about the virus, the harmful, even lethal effects of wearing masks, disinformation about the number of Covid-19 positive cases, etc. Regional portals *raskrinkavanje.ba* and *istinomjer.ba* publish regular analyses and fact-checking on content published about the pandemic on various platforms.[137] An overview of the published items indicates that no platform is immune to the disinformation spread, even though Facebook accounts and click-bait portals lead the way.[138]

Croatia

WhatsApp and Viber, according to the platform Faktograf.[139] Often the comments under news are found in many news portal spreading fake news and misconceptions (such as: Index.hr, 24sata.hr, Narod.hr and many others).

134 Fake News Doet de Ronde, Maar Geloof Niet Alles Op Whatsapp En Facebook' HLN (3 December 2020), https://www.hln.be/binnenland/fake-news-doet-de-ronde-maar-geloof-niet-alles-op-whatsapp-en-facebook~a3172370/; 'Nationaal Crisiscentrum Waarschuwt Voor Fake News Op Sociale Media' Knack (16 March 2020), https://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/nationaal-crisiscentrum-waarschuwt-voor-fake-news-op-sociale-media/article-belga-1577169.html; 'Whatsapp Maakt Verspreiding van Valse Berichten Heel Wat Moeilijker' Metro (4 July 2020), https://nl.metrotime.be/2020/04/07/must-read/whatsapp-maakt-verspreiding-van-valse-berichten-heel-wat-moeilijker/

135 file:///C:/Users/smaslocerkic/Downloads/Op-ed_%20False%20narrative_Kapetanovic_0305.pdf

136 https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/pandemija-korona-virus-lazne-vesti/30486048.html

137 https://istinomjer.ba/uzivo-pracenje-dezinformacija-tokom-pandemije-covid-19/

138 https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/netacne-tvrdnje-o-rekordnim-brojevima-novozarazenih-koronavirusom

https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/erna-selimovic-internetska-senzacija-bez-ijedne-tacne-tvrdnje-o-koronavirusu

https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/da-ponovimo-medicinske-maske-vas-ne-mogu-otrovati-ugljen-dioksidom

139 https://faktograf.hr/2020/10/19/live-blog-dezinformacije-o-koronavirusu/

Cyprus

2. There are no clear-cut scientific studies in this regard. However, Facebook seems to be the platform which is mostly affected by Covid19 fake news since there is a massive spread of disinformation. We should notice, according to the latest Eurobarometer of EU related to "attitudes towards the impact of digitalization on our lives",[140] that given the fact that Cypriots visits sites from both Greece and Cyprus a large number of users come across fake news. Social media platforms are among the first three reasons for this danger (special Eurobarometer 503 related to the impact of digitalisation on daily lives). In that meaning we should notice that an Athens prosecutor is examining posts on social media networks and news sites claiming that the pandemic is essentially a conspiracy, urging people to refuse to accept fines and sanctions and to disobey restrictions to contain a further spread.[141] The same thing is being also examined in Cyprus.

Denmark

Facebook and its messaging service has been used to spread mis-information about Covid,[142] but also platforms as Instagram have been used.[143]

Estonia

There have been no methodical studies into this issue. The main known source for spreading disinformation is Facebook. Although news portals do not in general spread false information, there are a couple of portals that are known to portray information in a biased way or spread disinformation. The two main portals are objektiiv.ee and uueduudised.ee. For example, there are news items that emphasize the "international nature" of coronavirus cases in Estonia. An article on uueduudised.ee from 28 July states that "The Estonian corona epic was initiated by an Iranian, continued by the Italians, and now supplemented by Ukrainians and Poles".[144]

Finland

In Finland there is no wide and documented wave of disinformation. Only singular cases can be found from Facebook, Twitter and different online discussion platforms like Suomi24, Ylilauta and to a certain extent Iltalehti and Iltasanomat

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140 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_383

141 https://www.ekathimerini.com/255438/article/ekathimerini/news/authorities-crack-down-on-online-conspiracy-theories

142 https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/viden/kroppen/misinformation-om-mundbind-spredes-paa-facebook

143 https://www.tjekdet.dk/faktatjek/kendt-influencer-stempler-ind-i-corona-debatten-med-stribevis-af-usandheder

144 https://uueduudised.ee/uudis/eesti/eesti-koroonakollete-omaparaks-on-internatsionaalne-paritolu-sedapuhku-on-mangus-poola-voortooline/ .

Germany

There are no clear-cut scientific studies in this regard. In media reports, Telegram is often mentioned as a platform to dodge fact-checking and Covid-19-related content moderation.[145] The investigation and fact-checking network Correctiv published (non-representative) numbers indicating YouTube as primary source for Covid-19-related misinformation (2. Websites; 3. FB; 4. Twitter; 5. Telegram) and Whatsapp as the primary distribution channel (2. Facebook, 3. YT, 4. Website; 5. Twitter).

Israel

There are no scientific/empirical source indicating whether certain platforms were more affected than others in Israel. However in an Israeli conference regarding "fake news during covid-19 days" one of the speakers, Orit Perlov, who specializes in social media in the middle east, mentioned that in her opinion WhatsApp's groups are more dangerous in this time than public platforms such as twitter. Perlov gave as an example messages from military colleagues, and emphasized that the spreader identity provides credibility to the message delivered. The assumption that WhatsApp groups are more affected than other platforms is particularly relevant to small countries as Israel.[146]

Italy

Yes, some studies suggest Facebook, Pinterest and Twitter.[147] More generally, it has been remarked that the involvement of social media was deep and broad in Italy. Indeed: "Italy was totally involved in this infodemic. For instance, a report highlighted that the term "Coronavirus" accounted for 575,000 searches by Italian users out of a monthly total of 950,000 (Sciuto & Paoletti, 2020). In a study by Edelman (2020), Italy was the country with the highest percentage of people accessing news and information about the virus on a daily basis (58%), overtaking countries like Korea, Japan and US. AGCOM (2020) found that, as a proportion of disinformation published online, Coronavirus contents rose from 5% in early January to 46% in late March. On social media, in particular, Coronavirus posts increased to 36% of all messages produced by disinformation sources" (Lovari, 2020).

Latvia

Facebook has become a platform where the spread of disinformation, including Covid-19 connected fake news and especially videos explaining the dangers of vaccines and masks or the posts regarding the "fakeness" of Covid-19 tests, has been the easiest. Even though there are no researches on that yet, it can be seen when looking at the rebuked news and their sources[148]. Additionally, 2020 was a "good time" for the

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145 https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/ndr-wdr/corona-telegram-101.html

146 Orit Perlov "Fake news during Coronavirus time" Institute for National Security Studies (2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PI186oKq2xI&t=2435s

147 Fake News and Covid-19 in Italy: Results of a Quantitative Observational, Andrea Moscadelli, Giuseppe Albora, Massimiliano Alberto Biamonte, Duccio Giorgetti, Michele Innocenzio, Sonia Paoli, Chiara Lorini,Paolo Bonanni and Guglielmo Bonaccorsi, Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health 2020, 17(16), 5850; https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/17/16/5850/htm#B54-ijerph-17-05850.

148 https://www.apollo.lv/6930268/ari-viedokli-par-covid-19-policija-varetu-vertet-ka-krapsanu, https://www.tvnet.lv/7089050/dezinformacijas-modes-kliedziens-stasti-par-viltus-pozitiviem-covid-19-testiem and others

fake-news connected Facebook pages and also independent internet pages posting dubious news, which later got shared on Facebook.[149] Such information was also used by politicians to gain popularity.

Similarly, also WhatsApp became a source of fake news regarding full quarantine to be imposed in Latvia.[150] However, these have been more or less independent cases. In addition to that, a group of people fighting against vaccines, 5G and Bill Gates, after being "censored" by Facebook have also created their own channel in Telegram.[151] Nonetheless, this social network yet has to gain its popularity.

It is essential to note that several fake news have also been distributed in Russian or have been translated from this language. At the beginning of spring 2020 such news mainly denied the dangers of the virus.[152] Later the Russian-speaking media distributed news regarding the NATO Extended Presence Battlegroup stationed in Latvia, whose soldiers *en masse* supposedly had gotten ill with Covid-19.[153]

Lithuania

When it comes to social media, disinformation was mainly published on Facebook and YouTube. Besides that, it appeared on certain controversial news portals (Debunk EU: Latvia had the widest spread of Covid-19 related disinformation in May, 11-06-2020,[154] see specifically this link.[155]

Facebook groups were created, YouTube channels were advertised in such groups. Fake profiles were created on Facebook. Comments sections on mainstream news portals were used to districute disinformation. (Ekspertas apie Covid-19 ir dezinformaciją: pandemija atgaivino visas senąsias sąmokslo teorijas, 2020-09-26.[156] Comments on Facebook accounts of the Government and of the Ministry of Health are made from fake Facebook accounts (SAM įspėja: auga dezinformacijos kiekis, nukreiptas prieš kaukių dėvėjimą, 2020-09-17.[157]

According to Mažvydas Kunevičius, Chief Lieutenant of the Lithuanian Armed Forces, the Strategic Communication Department, since the beginning of the quarantine, such networks as YouTube, Facebook, VKontakte, Reddit, Twitter as well as controversial news portals and online blogs were used to spread misleading information and conspiracy theories. There were cases when e-mails were generated and sent to high-ranking officials, institutions and the media to perform information attacks (Experts warn: false information on Covid-19 on social media spreads fast, 12-05-2020).[158]

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149 https://rebaltica.lv/2020/03/atminudens-tirgotajs-maldina-par-koronavirusu/

150 https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/zinu-analize/covid-19-un-viltus-zinas-valsts-policija-var-vertet-ari-krapsanas-uzdosanu-par-viedokli.a352781

151 https://www.la.lv/video-pandemijas-vitus-zinu-topa-ka-bils-geits-izgudrojis-koronavirusu-un-cipo-cilvekus

152 https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/zinu-analize/dezinfodemijas-upuri-tikai-anonimi-bandinieki-ka-top-un-izplatas-meligas-zinas.a359760/

153 https://www.facebook.com/127277387309642/posts/2867373299966690/

154 https://en.delfi.lt/politics/debunk-eu-latvia-had-the-widest-spread-of-covid-19-related-disinformation-in-may.d?id=84505739

155 https://g1.dcdn.lt/images/pix/580x360/Ny0Hxe0BSzI/dissinformation-in-baltic-in-may-84505851.jpg

156 https://www.lrt.lt/mediateka/irasas/2000122788/ekspertas-apie-covid-19-ir-dezinformacija-pandemija-atgaivino-visas-senasias-samokslo-teorijas

157 https://sam.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/sam-ispeja-auga-dezinformacijos-kiekis-nukreiptas-pries-kaukiu-devejima

158 https://koronastop.lrv.lt/en/news/experts-warn-false-information-on-covid-19-on-social-media-spreads-fast

Moldova

There are no exact data in this regard. According to the survey conducted in May 2020 by WatchDog.md and CBS Axa,[159] the Degree of fake news according to reliable information sources had been the following:

Television: 7,48 points

Informative sites on internet: 7,26

Social networks on internet: 8,13

Social networks: Facebook: 7,8 points; Odnoklassniki: 8,3; Vkontakte: 8,0; Instagram: 7,6; Telegram: 7,3

Norway

There is no specific research on this, but some sources point towards disinformation on certain platforms. The website Faktisk.no fact checks information spread on social media and news stories. Their recent findings of disinformation relate mainly to Facebook posts,[160] but also document.no,[161] and one case about NRK.no.[162] Many of the Facebook posts they fact-check had gained attention as they were posted or shared by 'famous' Norwegians.

Portugal

Facebook and Whatsapp.[163]

Serbia

Scientific studies about spreading Covid-19 disinformation are still missing in Serbia, but *FakeNews tragač*, an online platform established within media and NGOs' *Debunking Disinformation* project to fight disinformation spread in the Serbian media and platforms, published the study on "Korona virus Infodemija u Srbiji" in April 2020.[164] The study includes research on the Covid-19 disinformation on popular platforms. From March 12 to April 12, 2020, the research team detected 43 disinformation about Covid-19, broadcasted 241 times by different traditional media and online platforms in Serbia. In the same period,

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159 MAI 2020. Impactul dezinformării în contextul pandemiei (Ro) / MAY 2020 The impact of misinformation in the context of the pandemic https://www.watchdog.md/2020/05/21/rezultatele-sondajului-realizat-la-comanda-watchdog-md-denota-un-impact-puternic-al-pandemiei-asupra-preferintelor-politice-si-gradului-de-incredere-in-teorii-conspirologice/

160 Faktisk.no: Facebook: a statement that a test method for Covid-19 was approved in 2015 is spreading across Facebook in Norway, originating from the Danish website corona-information.dk https://www.faktisk.no/faktasjekker/nrg/nei-en-testmetode-for-covid-19-ble-ikke-patentert-i-2015; Faktisk.no Facebook: a retired doctor posted disinformation about Covid-19 which spread fast after the post was shared by a Norwegian 'celebrity' https://www.faktisk.no/artikler/71v/pensjonert-lege-sprer-feilinformasjon-pa-facebook; https://www.faktisk.no/faktasjekker/lrp/jo-covid-19-er-farligere-enn-vanlig-influensa; https://www.faktisk.no/faktasjekker/pJB/nei-regjeringen-vil-ikke-bruke-forlenget-koronafullmakt-til-a-sette-inn-haeren-mot-folket; https://www.faktisk.no/artikler/dgq/illustrasjon-av-smitterisiko-inneholder-udokumenterte-tall; https://www.faktisk.no/faktasjekker/vn8/nei-japansk-nobelprisvinner-har-ikke-sagt-at-koronaviruset-er-menneskeskapt.

161 https://www.faktisk.no/artikler/Q5o/fortsatt-ikke-gode-beviser-for-at-koronaviruset-kom-fra-en-lab.

162 https://www.faktisk.no/artikler/gK2/nrks-omstridte-korona-artikkel-har-spredt-feilinformasjon-til-millioner.

163 https://visao.sapo.pt/atualidade/politica/2020-05-05-covid-19-mais-de-2-700-informacoes-falsas-detetadas-por-dia-nas-redes-sociais-na-europa/

164 The study is available in the Serbian language at https://fakenews.rs/wp-content/uploads/Korona-i-infodemija-u-Srbiji2020.pdf

241 disinformation only on Facebook was shared 223.446 times.[165] In the daily media, Facebook is also often mentioned as a platform from which various unverified information related to Covid-19 comes.[166]

It should be added that, in the 2018 Europe Communication Monitor Report, that targeted 48 countries, Serbia, together with the Check Republic, Russia and Romania, was identified as the country with the strongest impact of fake news.[5] The social media were detected as the most common source of disinformation. To fight against Covid-19 disinformation, the journalists in Serbia has established a specialized internet portal "raskrinkavanje.rs".[6]

South Africa

Yes, Whatsapp, followed by Facebook and then Twitter.[167]

Spain

The most affected platforms by Covid19-related disinformation are Whatsapp[168] [by "rumors, hoaxes, and interested inventions"], Facebook, Instagram[169] and Twitter, which "is a web of real people intertwined with a vast population of bots and fake accounts behind which we do not know who is hiding"[170]. More

over, the first three ones would be "responsible for more than two-thirds (69%) of all fake news"[171].

The European Communication Monitor (2018)[172] underlined that Spain was one of the countries with the most vivid debates about fake news (64,9%). Its public opinion was influenced by 61% (p. 20). The report also informs that Social Media is the largest source of false news (81.3%), after Media (59.6%) and internal media (14.3%) (p. 27). Communication professionals already foresee that until 2021 disinformation will be one of the issues with which they will have to deal (12,3%) (p. 46). Salaverría *et al.* (2019) understand disinformation when deliberately false data is spread for economic, ideological or other reasons[173]. This study distinguishes the following types of hoaxes by gradation: joke, exaggeration, decontextualization,

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165 Ibid., p. 7.

166 See BBC News in Serbian, "Corona Virus, Blanka and China: Conspiracy Theories, Canards and Misconceptions" (29.01.2020) at https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/svet-51292766 5European Communication Monitor, The Report of 2018, p. 17,

available at https://www.communicationmonitor.eu/2018/06/13/ecm-european-communication-monitor-2018/. See at https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/covid19/?vrsta=dezinformacije.

167 See https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-09-20-disinformation-in-a-time-of-covid-19-weekly-trends-in-south-africa-10/, referencing real411.org.za.

168 Ismael Marinero (El Mundo)16-3-2020. Retrieved from https://www.elmundo.es/cultura/2020/03/16/5e6b76cc21efa07c058b4572.html

169 Esteban Urreizieta (El Mundo) 1-5-2020. Retrieved from https://www.elmundo.es/espana/2020/05/01/5eac070221efa07e148b45fe.html

170 Marcel Obst 31.5.2020 Why disinformation is faster and more efficient. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.es/entry/por-que-la-desinformacion-es-mas-rapida-y-eficiente_es_5ed285ecc5b66e04b2885269

171 Esteban Urreizieta (El Mundo) 1-5-2020. Retrieved from https://www.elmundo.es/espana/2020/05/01/5eac070221efa07e148b45fe.html

172 European Communication Monitor (2018) by Zerfass et al. Retrieved from https://www.communicationmonitor.eu/2018/06/13/ecm-european-communication-monitor-2018/

173 Salaverría et al. (2019) Disinformation in times of pandemia: typology of hoax about Covid-19. Retrieved from https://recyt.fecyt.es/index.php/EPI/article/view/epi.2020.may.15/50027

deception. The indisputably most frequent modality is deception (64.4%) (p. 10). As for the format, the most frequent is the text (p. 6).

Question 3: What have the five most popular platforms done to combat Covid-19-related disinformation in your country, including in relation to protests?

Note: We are especially interested in is specific measures taken by platforms within your country

Albania

No specific measures taken. Faktoje.al (mentioned above) has often pointed out to the spread of fake news. It should be said, though, that Albanian media portals are not that attentive or checking on the news. The government is re-considering a new law on digital platforms, portals and the spread of fake news by them. After OSCE and EU complained of the previous version of the Law passed by the parliament, they are now reconsidering. The new Law is expected to introduce heavy fines on portals with fake news.

Argentina

a) Facebook introduced a new feature on its platform that automatically detects when a user is about to post a link about the coronavirus and sends a notification with context about the article beforehand to prevent misinformation. Also created a hub.[174] More information here[175] and here[176]. b) Google is working with media in the region to help them distribute their content within Google products and launched an experience for Covid-19 within Google News (App, IOS and Web), which consists of highlighting the latest news about Covid-19 from trusted sources and news about its impact around the world. c) Twitter has started putting warning messages on tweets containing misleading information about Covid-19. Twitter is targeting claims confirmed to be false or misleading by experts such as public health authorities in which the accuracy, truthfulness or credibility is contested or unknown It said the new system would also apply to tweets sent before this week. Teams are using and improving on internal systems to proactively monitor content related to Covid-19. d) Alphabet Inc's YouTube is working to remove videos from its site that spread misinformation about Covid-19 vaccines. This will include claims that the vaccine will kill people or cause infertility, or that microchips will be implanted in people who receive it. YouTube already removes videos that dispute the transmission of Covid-19 and promote medically unsubstantiated methods of treatment. Whatsapp reduced the spread of misinformation since the start of the Covid-19 crisis. Users are now restricted to share content that has already been forwarded numerous times just one chat at a time and as WhatsApp cannot directly monitor content or stop misinformation from being spread altogether, the app has enabled the WHO and national health authorities to share relevant facts about the pandemic to the population at large through automated accounts.

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174 https://www.facebook.com/coronavirus_info/

175 https://about.fb.com/news/2020/10/coronavirus/

176 https://about.fb.com/?s=covid

Belgium

Facebook says it informs its users when fact checkers find videos which include Covid-19-related disinformation, showing people the correct information instead.[177] The platform moreover removes misleading messages or conspiracy theories that confuse people and may be harmful if believed, thereby focusing on claims that are intended to discourage treatment or to take appropriate precautionary measures.[178] Most likely, Facebook's policy in this respect does not apply solely in Belgium. Accordingly, it should be noted that Facebook also promotes the information site set up by the Belgian Federal Public Health Service on the coronavirus, www.info-coronavirus.be, in the search results on people's timeline when they search for information about the virus.179 The Facebook pages of the relevant authorities have also been recognised as an official source of information by the platform.[180]

Instagram also promotes the information by the Belgian Federal Public Health Service on the coronavirus, www.info-coronavirus.be, when individuals use search key words related to the virus. The same is true for **YouTube.**

Twitter, in turn, contacted the public health authorities all around the world, including the Belgian ones, itself since the company is concerned about the large amount of Covid-19-related disinformation that is appearing on its platform.[181] To prevent the spread thereof, it now promotes the messages of the Federal Public Health Service about the coronavirus.[182] In particular, the information distributed by the authorities about the coronavirus has become more important in the algorithm used by Twitter.[183] In this way, it is given a more prominent place on the platform.[184] Moreover, if you enter the term "coronavirus" in the Twitter search engine in Belgium, you will also see a message referring you to **www.info-coronavirus.be**, the information site set up by the Federal Public Health Service on the coronavirus, at the top of the search result under the heading 'Know the facts'.[185]

No specific information was found about the other platforms.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The most noticeable initiative was a joint Viber Channel „Covid-19 Provjereno" (eng. Covid-19 Confirmed or Checked) started on 4 April by several platforms and portals in the region, namely Raskrinkavanje.ba,

177 Tim Verheyden, 'Facebook, Google, Twitter En Co Schouder Aan Schouder in Strijd Tegen Valse Informatie over Coronavirus' VRT NWS (18 February 2020) <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2020/02/18/desinformatiecoronavirus/>.

178 Ibid.

179 Facebook Helps Us to Promote Reliable Information About the New Coronavirus Covid-19' (Coronavirus Covid-19, 24 February 2020) <https://www.info-coronavirus.be/en/news/facebook-helps-us-to-promote-reliable-information-about-the-new-covid-19/>.

180 Ibid.

181 'Twitter Promoot FOD Volksgezondheid in Strijd Tegen Fake News over Coronavirus' Metro (2 July 2020) <https://nl.metrotime.be/2020/02/07/news/twitter-promoot-fod-volksgezondheid-in-strijd-tegen-fake-news-over-coronavirus/>.

182 Ibid.

183 Ibid.

184 Ibid.

185 Ibid; Tim Verheyden, 'Facebook, Google, Twitter En Co Schouder Aan Schouder in Strijd Tegen Valse Informatie over Coronavirus' VRT NWS (18 February 2020) <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2020/02/18/desinformatiecoronavirus/>.

Faktograf.hr, Razkrinkavanje.si, Fakenews.rs, Raskrinkavanje.me, Raskrikavanje.rs and F2N2.mk (BiH, Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, Monte Negro and North Macedonia), that monitors, checks and detects disinformation and false information and disseminates only fact-checked news about the Covid -19 pandemic. The Community has just over 6,000 members,[186] which is not a large number, when compared to the numbers of daily users of platforms in BiH and other countries of the region. Its value could lie in the fact that journalists and other media are members, and who, by using the community with fact-checked content, contribute to fighting the spread of disinformation on their respective platforms.

According to media reports, Facebook has banned the work of the BiH version of the Qanon group[187], identified as a far-right conspiracy theory that disseminates false information also with regard to Covi-19pandemic. Previously, some of the content published in this private FB group have been flagged as false.[188]

Croatia

Platforms like Facebook or Twitter acted in the same way as in the rest of the world removing some contents. The Croatian Agency for Electronic Media issued a warning to the public media in March 2020 about the need to report truly and responsibly about Covid19[189]According to the statement by its head in October 2020 the public media have been very successful in following this warning.[190] Platforms were not covered by this opinion.

Cyprus

3. There is no source on this subject. However, it is worth to mention that an online collaborative platform has been put into operation in order to help journalists and other organizations verify social networking in an attempt to counter the spread of false news. This platform called "Truly Media" was developed by the Athens Technology Center (ATC), in cooperation with Deutsche Welle, to support journalists in verifying the content of posts. The platform used the German news agency DPA and Bayerischer Rundfunk during the recent German elections last September to collect and verify subscriptions of social network users. Mr. Larkos Larkou, the Chairman of the Cyprus News Agency (CNA) has recently addressed a special speech on this issue on the occasion of presentation of the platform.[191]

186https://invite.viber.com/?g2=AQBHeZncLF6p%2F0tBCz5gabc1YuzJcc3BS8fEYr7xBX2AzM%2BBflv1qJnJeb76JULk&lang=en, accessed 5 October 2020.

187 https://ba.voanews.com/a/facebook-teorije-zavjere/5613514.html, accessed on 13 October 2020.

188 The group has in total 509 members, and out of 300 published items, around 15 were flagged as false by Facebook administrators. https://www.facebook.com/groups/2340581352710860/

https://detektor.ba/2020/09/04/qanon-u-bih-teorije-zavjere-pod-plastom-slobode-govora/ accessed on 5 October 2020.

189 https://www.aem.hr/vijesti/upozorenje-vijeca-za-elektronicke-medije-svim-elektronickim-medijima-u-republici-hrvatskoj/

190 https://www.novilist.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/analiza-fake-newsa-u-hrvatskim-medijima-te-pojave-gotovo-i-nema-iako-je-najveca-kazna-200-njemackih-maraka/

191 https://www.truly.media/truly-media-presented-in-cyprus-news-agency/

Denmark

All platforms have removed content that spread mis-information about Covid19,[192] removed the opportunity to monetize YouTube videos with corona-related content, and removed users who spread mis-information (e.g. Instagram[193]).

Country-wise, we see the creation of novel centers for verification of information that certify or debunk false articles, such as https://www.tjekdet.dk/. We believe that these efforts are not specific to Denmark, but globally adopted policies adopted by each platform.

Estonia

There is no specific action by the international portals. Estonian language portals such as delfi.ee and postimees.ee are publishing daily detailed updates of the Covid-19 information, including statistics showing dynamics. This is done in order to provide to the population accurate information. There is a portal which has measure so-called "fact-control" where it is analysing a statement by a well-known public figure and reached a conclusion about the accuracy of such statement. For example. Delfi.ee featured on 07 November a fact-control to the issue whether wearing a mask affects negatively one's breathing. The conclusion was that it does not. These fact controls are related to issues which matter most to the society at large.

Finland

 THL (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare) has been actively disseminating fact-based information, Faktabaari has been the main non-profit organisations that has done fact checking, in general YLE (Finnish Public Broadcasting Company) has done strong co-operation with health authorities. But same is true with other main media platforms (MTV uutiset, Helsingin Saomat).

Germany

Whatsapp: Chatbot to debunk Corona myths;[194] German version by the German Red Cross.[195]International measures have also been implemented in Germany: Fact-checking and content moderation on FB and Instagram; limited forwarding on Whatsapp; privileging of trustworthy sources, information boxes under videos, no fact-checking in Germany yet on YT.[196]

Israel

Platforms helped promote verified information from official sources. For example, WhatsApp helped the ministry of health to launch a WhatsApp's line that uses both chatbot and human response for more complexed questions. Facebook offered assistance in financing ministry of health's posts on it's media, in

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192 https://danwatch.dk/perspektiv/facebook-og-google-censurerer-falske-corona-opslag-som-aldrig-foer/

193 https://nyheder.tv2.dk/samfund/2020-09-15-instagram-lukker-sangers-profil-efter-omstridte-coronaopslag

194 https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/who-health-alert-brings-covid-19-facts-to-billions-via-whatsapp

195 https://t3n.de/news/corona-deutsches-rotes-kreuz-1269831/

196 https://www.sueddeutsche.de/digital/strategien-gegen-corona-falschinformationen-loeschen-berichtigen-verstecken-1.4906049

order to support distribution of verified information. In order to fight disinformation regarding Covid-19, Globes, one of Israel's main news sites (not top 5 platforms but a leading news site) has decided to partially open it's paywall by making daily articles regarding covid-19 accessible to anyone (a policy similar to other outlets in the world such as the WSJ) Tiktok (not a top 5 platform)– cooperation between the presidency of businesses and employers in Israel, Professor Roni Gamzu (Israel's Coronavirus project coordinator) and Tiktok Israel created a music video featuring many teen stars in order to raise the awareness among children and youth regarding keeping social distance and wearing masks.

Italy

From the side of platforms, measures taken are not different from the usual ones (outsourcing to fact-checking platform and/or internal assessment of accuracy). Facta - the service of factì-checking via whatsapp - was active in Italy since 2 april 2020.[197]

In Italy much attention was dedicated to Avaaz project, which is private organization aiming at stopping the diffusion of disinformation and at implementing accuracy; Avaaz works in many countries, but it has received attention in Italy in national accredited newspapers (such as La Repubblica or La Stampa) as a reliable source to detect disinformation).[198]

Latvia

Exactly at the beginning of pandemic (March 2020) Facebook started to cooperate with independent fact-checkers Re:Baltica[199] and Delfi[200] (both being the Latvian media), who now have the rights to mark specific Facebook posts as containing false messages. These media also publish the reasoning on these decisions on their webpages with lengthy, fact-based explanations, thus reaching also other people outside Facebook.[201] International measures such as limited forwarding on WhatsApp have also been implemented in Latvia.

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197 https://www.repubblica.it/tecnologia/social-network/2020/04/02/news/da_facebook_un_progetto_pilota_per_il_fact-checking_su_whatsapp-252963409/

198 https://secure.avaaz.org/campaign/en/facebook_threat_health/

199 https://rebaltica.lv/2020/03/recheck-klust-par-oficialajiem-fb-faktu-parbaudes-partneriem/

200 https://www.delfi.lv/par-mums-new/delfi-zurnalisti-pievienojas-facebook-faktu-parbauditaju-programmai.d?id=52064021

201 i.e., https://www.delfi.lv/news/national/politics/faktu-parbaude-timekli-maldinosi-parspile-covid-19-testu-izmaksas.d?id=52309665 , https://www.delfi.lv/news/national/politics/faktu-parbaude-latvija-spkc-sniedz-informaciju-par-covid-19-del-miruso-personu-skaitu.d?id=52291669, https://www.delfi.lv/campus/raksti/soctiklos-izplata-greizu-datu-tabulu-par-covid-19-viltus-pandemiju?id=52225319, https://www.delfi.lv/news/national/politics/ne-visiem-mirusajiem-covid-19-pacientiem-nebija-ieprieks-atklatas-smagas-slimibas.d?id=52202393 and others.

Lithuania

At least one Facebook group was blocked (Ekspertas apie Covid-19 ir dezinformaciją: pandemija atgaivino visas senąsias sąmokslo teorijas, 2020-09-26,[202] ; the group in question had 50,000 followers, 01/07/2020)[203].

Moldova

There are five primary roles that social platforms are playing during the pandemic outbreak in R. Moldova[204]: to combat disinformation on coronavirus; to influence the public response to the outbreak; to provide support and assistance for vulnerable social categories affected by the pandemic through the creation of the special groups[205];[206] (for example: "Coronavirus Moldova: mutual help," "We support local business in Moldova"); to keep decision-makers accountable.

In order to spread awareness about the Russian campaign against Western countries, Moldova's social media has provided regularly updated information about Russia's disinformation. Analyses conducted by local media outlets emphasized that fake news labs in the Russian Federation have used various untruthful information about the COVID-19 pandemic, which is circulated on social media, to launch a wide-scale disinformation campaign directed against the US and the EU, that have influenced the Republic of Moldova.[207]

Facebook places info from authorized institutions such as Moldovan Emergency Assistance 112, to fight disinformation.[208]

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202 https://www.lrt.lt/mediateka/irasas/2000122788/ekspertas-apie-covid-19-ir-dezinformacija-pandemija-atgaivino-visas-senasias-samokslo-teorijas

203 https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1193932/dezinformacija-karantino-metu-nuo-konspiraciniu-teoriju-apie-covid-19-kilme-iki-siulymu-nesiprausti

204 The Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism". COVID-19 Disinformation Response Index 2020, p. 108-109. http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/DRI2020WebFIN.pdf

205 List of the most useful groups on Facebook in Moldova XX: communities that help each other in the context of COVID-19 / Lista celor mai utile grupuri pe Facebook-ul din Moldova XX: comunități care se ajută în contextul COVID-19. April 4, 2020. https://diez.md/2020/04/04/lista-celor-mai-utile-grupuri-pe-facebook-ul-din-moldova-xx-comunitati-care-se-ajuta-in-contextul-covid-19/

206 List of the most useful groups on Facebook in Moldova XIX: communities that appeared in the context of COVID-19 / Lista celor mai utile grupuri pe Facebook-ul din Moldova XIX: comunități apărute în contextul COVID-19. https://diez.md/2020/03/18/lista-celor-mai-utile-grupuri-pe-facebook-ul-din-moldova-xix-comunitati-aparute-in-contextul-covid-19/

207 The Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism". COVID-19 Disinformation Response Index 2020, p. 108-109. http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/DRI2020WebFIN.pdf

208 Example of message: https://www.facebook.com/Serviciul112/videos/stop-dezinformare-covid-19/248733352862224/; Dedicated page for info on Covid-19:

https://www.facebook.com/coronavirus_info/?page_source=bookmark

Ministry of Health anti-disinformation message.

https://www.facebook.com/protectiesocialamoldova/photos/%C3%AEn-timpul-pandemiei-de-covid-19-ca-%C8%99i-%C3%AEn-cazul-altor-situa%C8%9Bii-de-urgen%C8%9B%C4%83-suntem-/3314434821943759/

Online training in the Republic of Moldova: learn how to be immune to false news and misinformation, including about COVID-19:

https://diez.md/2020/10/19/invata-cum-sa-fii-imun-la-stirile-false-si-la-dezinformare-participand-la-un-training-online.

Norway

Facebook entered a third-party fact checking agreement with Faktisk.no in 2018,[209] which has covered a lot of disinformation about Covid-19 this year.[210] NRK is referring to the Norwegian Institute of Public Health for correct information.[211] Medietilsynet (the Norwegian Media Authority) ran a fact checking campaign to prevent the spread of false information about Covid-19.[212]

In the beginning of the pandemic, most large news outlet websites (Aftenposten.no, NRK.no, VG.no, etc.) had a "Covid-19" banner on top of the page for the latest information about Covid. These information sites would point to FHI (Folkehelseinstituttet; the National Institute of Public Health) and helsenorge.no (the official health platform for inhabitants of Norway)[213] for up-to-date information. Now, these top banners with direct links to official Covid-19 information are no longer there, and there are few links to FHI and helsenorge.no in general.

Portugal (a)

The International Fact Checking Network created a system available 24 hours a day that allows WhatsApp users to detect fake news about Covid-19. In Portugal, the online journal "Observador" is part of the project. However, it is not available in Portuguese.[214]

Portugal (b)

A strong presence of ethics committees and data protection groups. Legislation on data protection and on the security of citizens' identity on digital networks has been strengthened.

Serbia

What could be noticed is that certain social networks such as Facebook and Instagram have introduced fact-checking and content moderation, but in this context, no platform in Serbia cooperates with them.[215]

South Africa

Regulations issued in terms of the Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002 render it an offence to disseminate information about Covid, any person's Covid status or any government measures against Covid.[216] Directives issued under the regulations obligate certain Electronic Services Licensees, OTTs and ISPs to

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209 https://www.faktisk.no/om-oss/facebook.

210 https://www.faktisk.no/om-oss/facebook.

211 NRK: https://www.nrk.no/korona/status/?utm_campaign=korona-minisenter&utm_source=button&utm_medium=status.

212 https://medietilsynet.no/mediebildet/slik-avslorer-du-falske-nyheter/.

213 https://www.helsenorge.no/om-helsenorge-no/.

214 https://observador.pt/2020/05/04/embargo-nao-publicar-ha-um-robot-no-whatsapp-a-combater-fake-news-sobre-covid-19-e-o-observador-esta-a-ajuda-lo/

215 FakeNews tragač, "Korona virus Infodemija u Srbiji", supra question 2.

216 https://www.saps.gov.za/newsroom/convid_regulations_2020.pdf.

remove fake news related to Covid-19 from their platforms immediately after it is identified as such.[217] It is difficult to monitor compliance with these provisions, but local social media offices do not appear to be monitoring the platforms for misinformation or removing such information. Instead, online newspapers and non-governmental organisations run fact checks, and misinformation is removed in response to public outrage or the possibility of criminal prosecution rather than any measures imposed by the social media platforms themselves. There has been a call for the group administrators of WhatsApp groups to monitor the content of their groups. The main non-governmental organisations monitoring and correcting misinformation are the Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change (CABC), Real 411, AFP, and AfricaCheck.[218]

Spain

To combat disinformation, globally social networks, spread the news in an alternative way with truthful information. Sometimes in a localized way in Spain. In addition, social networks (i.e., Facebook, Google, Twitter, YouTube) follow the EU Code of Good Conduct.[219] In general, social networks and the media provide truthful information, which is contrasted by the verification platforms, as a supplementary service to combat misinformation. Regarding YouTube and Twitter, apparently they filter contents thanks to specialized personnel[220]. WhatsApp does not directly verify, nor does it control encrypted messages, but rather facilitates the contact of verification platforms to users when they have doubts. According to the company itself, it has four verification platforms in Spain (Maldita, Newtral, AFP Factual and EFE Verifica)[221]. Facebook seems to have Newtral, Maldita.es and AFP as contracted companies[222]. Instagram at least uses Efe Verifica[223].

Three types of verification platforms exist. Firstly, Spanish Fact Checking platforms[224] that have been already accredited by IFCN (International Fact-Checking Network[225]): Maldita (2014), Newtral (2018) and Efe Verifica (2019). Secondly, other foreign platforms that work in Spanish, such as AFP Factual[226] that holds IFCN accreditation[227] too. Thirdly, attention may be paid to two other Spanish platforms without

217 https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202003/43164gon-417.pdf

218 https://www.cabc.org.za/reports/2020-04-09-mis-dis-information-careza-6th-april-2020/ https://www.cabc.org.za/reports/2020-04-09-mis-dis-information-careza-5th-april-2020/ https://www.cabc.org.za/about-us; https://factcheck.afp.com/about-us https://africacheck.org/reports/live-guide-all-our-coronavirus-fact-checks-in-one-place/

219 Rtve. Retrieved from https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20200611/crisis-del-covid-19-dispara-pandemia-desinformacion/2016916.shtml

220 Source: interviews with representatives of the verification platforms. Unpublished.

221 Whatsapp. Retrieved from https://faq.whatsapp.com/general/ifc-n-fact-checking-organizations-on-whatsapp.

222 https://www.businessinsider.es/facebook-contrata-newtral-maldita-afp-combatir-fake-news-387165

223 Source: interview with a representative of the verification platform Efe Verifica. Unpublished.

224 López, F. and Rodríguez, J. M. (2020) The fact checking in Spain. Platforms, practices and distinctive features. Estudios sobre el mensaje periodístico, num: 3: https://doi.org/10.5209/esmp.65246

225 Salaverría et al. (2019) Disinformation in pandemic times: typology of the hoax about Covid-19 (p.5). Retrieved from https://recyt.fecyt.es/index.php/EPI/article/view/epi.2020.may.15/50027

226 https://factual.afp.com/

227 https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/signatories

IFCN accreditation: RTVE Verifica and the Catalan Verificat. In turn, these verification platforms made a report for the European Union.

Regarding the initiatives that are detected in Spain, Twitter seems to have increased its verification efforts, has offered granting aid and financed projects related to verification, and has promoted verified content and official accounts that report on the coronavirus. It is also detected that Facebook and Instagram have increased the team of collaborators to carry out verification tasks[228].

228 Source: interviews with representatives of the verification platforms. Unpublished.

Question 4: In particular, can you find any statements by a) politicians or b) platform representatives (like Public Policy Directors) on the issues of Covid-19-related disinformation on platforms in your country (and in your country's language)? If yes, please cite the main points and give a source.

Albania

The prime Minister of Albania said during the pandemic period as below: "My page on Facebook served only to accelerate and expand the space of dissemination of information on the decisions taken step by step which by the very nature of this war as in the whole world have been numerous and have often changed day by day."[229]

Argentina

The National Ministry of Health and PAHO launched the Covid-19 supplement of the Argentine Public Health Magazine.[230] Report of the Internet Observatory on the construction and dissemination of fake news that became public in digital media and social networks.[231] All the misinformation about Covid19.[232]

Belgium

Answering a number of (written) parliamentary questions, posed by senator Stephanie D'hose (Open VLD), concerning whether the efforts by the Belgian security services to trace Covid-19-related disinformation indeed pay off[233], former Minister of the Interior, Pieter De Crem (CD&V) replied:

"As far as the federal police is concerned, the i2-IRU section of DJSOC is competent to combat "fake news" as part of its mission to detect illegal online content related to terrorism, radicalism, propaganda, violent extremism and hate speech.

The section has been commissioned to focus on the detection of "fake news" related to the coronavirus published on the Internet.

The "fake news" related to the coronavirus has been detected by DJSOC/i2-IRU since the appearance of the disease. This content is automatically reported to the platforms by requesting a removal request.

Requests for active collaboration were sent by the section to the major social networking platforms present on the Internet.

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229 https://kryeministria.al

230 https://www.paho.org/es/noticias/20-8-2020-ministerio-salud-nacion-ops-lanzan-suplemento-covid-19-revista-argentina-salud

231 https://www.argentina.gob.ar/noticias/no-compartamos-noticias-falsas

232 https://chequeado.com/el-explicador/coronavirus-mira-todas-las-desinformaciones-aca/

233 Lars Bové, 'Regering Hekelt Sociale Media Die Verdienen Aan Nepnieuws over Corona' De Tijd (30 April 2020), https://www.vsse.be/sites/default/files/corona-uk-batpdf_0.pdf.

It should be noted that "fake news" is not legally defined and therefore it is not possible to prosecute the publishers without malicious intent.

On 30 March 2020, DJSOC/i2-IRU has already discovered and reported 231 facts related to "fake news" and 16 sites publishing this type of content.

As far as the sites are concerned, in the absence of a legal basis, it is difficult to legally oblige the Belgian access providers or the DNS to carry out the removal or redirection to the "STOP" page of the government.

"Fake news" appears regularly on all social networks and internet sites.

Usually it concerns content that spreads false rumors of a medical nature, about the origin of the virus, or about the remedies to be taken to prevent the disease.

Sometimes this content stigmatizes a minority as being responsible for the spread of the virus.

The i2-IRU section has no coercive powers over social networking platforms and can only request removal. The platforms are not obliged to respond to these requests".[234]

Former Minister of Telecommunications, Philippe De Backer (Open VLD), stated that:

"As far as possible steps are concerned, the online platforms obviously play a major role. All major Internet platforms have made efforts to increase the visibility of the World Health Organization (WHO), and, in Belgium, of the government website www.info-coronavirus.be, on their services. They have also all adapted their content policies in response to Covid-19. Facebook, for example, announced that it would now remove claims intended to discourage treatment or the taking of appropriate precautions. However, there are several important challenges with regard to the new content restrictions, especially in terms of transparency of reasoning and enforcement of the rules. In addition, the major platforms continue to generate revenue with disinformation and harmful content about the pandemic, for example by hosting online ads on pages that misrepresent migrants as the cause of the virus, promote false treatments or spread conspiracy theories about the virus".[235]

The former Minister of Telecommunications, Philippe De Backer (Open VLD), furthermore stated that "[t]he big online platforms continue to generate revenue with disinformation and malicious content about the pandemic, for example by hosting online advertisements on pages that misrepresent migrants as the cause of the virus".[236]

However, in Belgium, no specific statements seem to have been made by platform representatives (like Public Policy Directors) on the issues of Covid-19-related disinformation on platforms.

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234 'Schriftelijke Vraag Nr. 7-417 van Stéphanie D'hose (Open VLD) Aan de Minister van Veiligheid En Binnenlandse Zaken, Belast Met Buitenlandse Handel: Coronacrisis - Desinformatie - Fake News - Sociale Media - Aanpak - Maatregelen (Covid-19)' (2020), https://www.senate.be/www/?MIval=/Vragen/SchriftelijkeVraag&LEG=7&NR=417&LANG=nl.

235 'Schriftelijke Vraag Nr. 7-418 van Stephanie D'Hose (Open Vld) Aan de Minister van Digitale Agenda, Telecommunicatie En Post, Belast Met Administratieve Vereenvoudiging, Bestrijding van de Sociale Fraude, Privacy En Noordzee: Coronacrisis - Desinformatie - Fake News - Sociale Media - Aanpak - Maatregelen (Covid-19)' (2020) <https://www.senate.be/www/?MIval=/Vragen/SchriftelijkeVraag&LEG=7&NR=418&LANG=nl>.

236 Lars Bové, 'Regering Hekelt Sociale Media Die Verdienen Aan Nepnieuws over Corona' De Tijd (30 April 2020) <https://www.vsse.be/sites/default/files/corona-uk-batpdf_0.pdf>.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The early period of the Covi-19virus spread in BiH, followed by the government „lockdown" measures (mid-March 2020), has seen the unprecedented information overload (infodemic), some of which can presumably be qualified as disinformation. In those early days, government officials invested their efforts in urging the public to consume the information in a responsible manner and warned about the hazards of trusting unverified sources and news. Some examples:

Šefik Džeferović, Chairman of the BiH Presidency called the citizens to use exclusively information coming from official institutions and published by credible media. He also demanded that all media in BiH report in a truthful, objective and responsible manner, in order to prevent sensationalism and the spread of fake news which could lead to panic.[237]

Communication Regulation Agency (CRA) of BiH issued an official statement urging media to publish information without sensationalism and spread of disinformation which might result in the spread of fear, panic and disturbance of public.[238]

On 4 April, the Press Council in BiH, a self-regulatory body for print and online media, issued a public appeal to citizens to report fake news and potential violations of the Council's Code for print and online media. It also reminded of the importance of accountable, accurate and timely reporting on the novel corona virus.[239]

In addition, and apart from the mere statements, the entity of Republika Srpska (one of the two entities in BiH) issued a decree prohibiting the transmission of information that may cause panic or severely violate public peace and order and introducing punitive measures, including fines, for spreading "fake news" about the virus in the media and on social networks. The order was in force from 19 March to 17 April 2020 and was annulled as a result of immense pressure coming from various international organisations, the media community and CSOs.[240]

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237 „Od svih medijskih kuća u Bosni i Hercegovini tražimo da izvještavaju istinito, objektivno i odgovorno, kako bi se spriječio senzacionalizam ili širenje lažnih vijesti, što može dovesti do panike."

„Građane Bosne i Hercegovine još jednom pozivamo da.... prilikom informiranja koriste isključivo informacije čiji su izvor zvanične institucije i stručne osobe i koje objavljuju kredibilni mediji." http://www.predsjednistvobih.ba/saop/default.aspx?id=87883&langTag=bs-BA, published on 21 March 2020, accessed 5 October 2020

238 „Agencija apeluje na medije da prilikom izvještavanja o ovoj temi pristupe profesionalno, pozivajući se na vjerodostojne izvore i protokole nadležnih organa, na način da se informacije objavljuju bez senzacionalizma i širenja dezinformacija koje bi mogle uticati na širenje straha, panike i uznemirenosti šire javnosti." https://docs.rak.ba/documents/168aa74f-bbb4-4a88-bd0a-5ffc344f12cf.pdf the CRA report contains the information on the proceedings conducted pursuant to several complaints with regards to reporting about the pandemic, even though the CRA did not find violation of its Code on audiovisual services and media service of radio in any of the cases, it did, on several occasions, appeal to platforms and media outlets to refrain from disseminating disinformation.

https://www.aa.com.tr/ba/balkan/rak-bih-pozvao-na-odgovorno-i-ta%C4%8Dno-izvje%C5%A1tavanje-o-pandemiji-korona-virusa-u-medijima-/1763702, accessed on 5 October

239 "Vijeće za štampu u BiH, uz puno uvažavanje svih teškoća sa kojima se mediji i novinari susreću, podsjeća na važnost poštivanja Kodeksa za štampu i online medije BiH te na odgovorno, precizno i blagovremeno izvještavanje o novom koronavirusu Covid-19, čime će mediji pokazati svoju odgovornost i profesionalnost…".https://www.vzs.ba/index.php/vijesti/aktuelnosti/3859-saopcenje-vijece-za-stampu-u-bih-poziva-gradane-da-prijavljuju-lazne-vijesti, accessed on 6 October 2020

240 https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/449041, accessed on 7 October

Croatia

Faktograf[241] makes checks on different statements and fake-news claims and looks for the truth behind them.

Cyprus

4. a) The department of cybercrime police of the Republic of Cyprus has recently announced special advices on its official site warning citizens about fake news around Covid-19.

"The spread of disinformation and misinformation around #Covid19 has potentially harmful consequences for public health and effective crisis communication. Stay vigilant and only trust information from official accounts!".[242]

b) "President Nicos Anastasiades stepped in on Wednesday in attempt to effectively put an end to the "fake news" stirring up "unfounded" concerns among the public over the coronavirus crisis being taken advantage of for the quiet installation of 5G network infrastructure. Condemning the creation and dissemination of 5G-related fake news, Anastasiades said that no company has been granted license to install 5G networks on the island".[243]

c) "the news that a pharmacist and a market worker tested positive for Covid19 are fake", Representative of the Minister of Health, Margarita Kyriakou.[244]

Denmark

 - Facebook policy director, states that it is not the task to check if politicians are telling the truth or not.[245]
- Lisbeth Knudsen, is the interim editor-in-chief of Mandag Morgen / Altinget, chairman of the Democracy Commission, the VL groups and the Danish School of Media and Journalism.

Estonia

There are no such statements by platform representatives addressing directly the matter of misinformation. Some politicians have commented in FB government policies, for example the Minister of Social Affairs Mr. Tanel Kiik. Other politicians from the opposition are often using FB to express their views on the matter of Covid-19. These postings once in a while call for the need to provide to the public accurate information, but we have not detected that the postings address specifically misinformation matters.

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241 https://faktograf.hr/2020/10/19/live-blog-dezinformacije-o-koronavirusu/

242 https://cyberalert.cy/anakoinwseis/covid-19-pseudeis-eidiseis/&lang=2

243 https://knews.kathimerini.com.cy/en/news/president-slams-5g-fake-news

244 https://inbusinessnews.reporter.com.cy/business/commerce/article/242943/pasyle-fake-news-to-kroysma-se-yperagra

245 https://www.altinget.dk/artikel/facebook-politikerne-skal-kunne-sige-mere-paa-de-sociale-medier-end-borgerne

Finland

Findings from Faktabaari factchecking on Covi-19disinformation can be found here.[246] This is also provided in international website of poynter.org.[247]

Germany

a) Federal Minister of Health, Jens Spahn: "Especially in social media, there are many people with their own interests at stake who want to unsettle citizens." He had the impression that they from outside or inside "want to disintegrate us in our debate, in our society."[248]

b) Federal Minister of Justice, Christine Lambrecht: "I expect social networks to live up to their responsibility: They must clearly prioritize trustworthy and relevant information, quickly identify and delete fake news and block accounts that spread it."[249]

c) Minister of the Interior of the State of Lower Saxony, Boris Pistorius, with regards to social media and messenger services: "It must be prohibited to publicly disseminate untrue allegations about the supply situation of the population, medical care or cause, routes of infection, diagnosis and therapy of Covid-19."[250]

d) Minister of Justice of the State of Saxony-Anhalt, Anne-Marie Keding: "I think it is wrong to introduce an additional criminal offence for fake news now. [...] That would be practically impossible to implement. [...] These social networks should finally live up to their responsibility. [e.g. no anonymity.] I consider the mixture of fake news and social bots a great danger."[251]

Israel

a) Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel – I call the public to beware of disinformation regarding Covid-19 in Israel. Follow only formal announcements by the ministry of health and officials.[252] I would like to disprove an urban legend that is clearly fake news, whereby I attend to implant subdermal microchips, this kind of conspiracies is surreal.[253]

b) Motti Cohen, Acting Chief of Police – The police will act firmly towards those who will choose to spread disinformation, that could generate panic among the public. The police call the public to restraint and act responsibly. There is a strict ban on distribution of "fake news". Formal announcements are only distributed

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246 https://faktabaari.fi/somessa-leviv-thl-ja-koronavirus-uutisissa-kooste-on-harhaanjohtava-ja-vahingoittavaa-tietoa/

247 https://www.poynter.org/coronavirusfactsalliance/

248 https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/fake-news-bei-coronavirus-falschmeldungen-und-verschwoerungstheorien-verstaerken-die-angst/25491216.html

249 https://www.bmjv.de/SharedDocs/Zitate/DE/2020/031720_Falschmeldungen.html

250 https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/coronavirus-boris-pistorius-fordert-strafen-gegen-fake-news-a-ed5050b5-c194-4890-a4c3-c713290134f3

251 https://www.volksstimme.de/sachsen-anhalt/corona-krise-keding-gegen-straftverfolgung-von-fake-news

252 https://www.gov.il/he/Departments/news/spoke_start080320

253 https://www.knesset.tv/committees/commentary-columns/articles/22613/

by officials and in the Ministry of Health's website.[254]
c) Ministry of Communication – Over the last few hours, many "fake news" messages about the Coronavirus are being distributed. The last ones are false messages regarding Givatayim. The Ministry of Health stresses that official and verified announcements can only be found at the Ministry of Health's website, at the Ministry of Health Coronavirus Updates telegram, and in the official CoronApp application. Help us distribute official and verified information only from official sources.[255]

In recent months there has been an obvious trend within social media, involving disinformation regarding the 5G technology and covid-19. For the avoidance of doubt, there is no relation between the 5G technology to covid-19, the rumor about this alleged relation is fake news.[256]

Italy

Yes, the Government instituted an anti-fake news task force acknowledging that "disinformation weakens the effort to limit the spreading of the pandemic disease".[257]

The Government also stated that the task force aims at enhancing and protecting citizens' rights to be informed, by promoting the identification of institutional and/or reliable sources, as well as by giving methodological insights to enhance awareness and 'ability to discern' in the selection and sharing of news in the internet.[258]

Latvia

a) Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Culture and State Police have published a plea for the people to critically appraise the sources from which information on Covid-19 is obtained, and to obtain the information from official sources. The appeal contains the guidelines prepared by the Ministry of Culture regarding the evaluation of information to recognise fake news.[259]

b) The main infectologist of Latvia has stated that homoeopathic remedies are not medicines and there is false information about their positive effects in combating the disease caused by the Covid-19. This opinion refers to a popular Facebook post[260]. This post was also exposed by other users, including doctors, among other things, on Twitter. It was stated that this post was going to be discussed at the meeting of the board of the Latvian Medical Association and also at the Certification Council of the Medical Association. Several

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254 https://www.gov.il/he/Departments/news/police_9-3-20_covid-19

255 https://www.health.gov.il/English/News_and_Events/Spokespersons_Messages/Pages/07032020_2.aspx

256 https://www.gov.il/he/Departments/news/01042020_2

257 https://informazioneeditoria.gov.it/it/notizie/unita-di-monitoraggio-per-il-contrasto-della-diffusione-di-fake-news-relative-al-covid-19-sul-web-e-sui-social-network-adottato-il-4-aprile-il-decreto-di-istituzione-presso-il-dipartimento/

258 https://informazioneeditoria.gov.it/media/3234/programmaoperativo.pdf

259 https://www.tvnet.lv/6926511/iedzivotaji-aicinati-nedalities-un-neizplatit-viltus-zinas-par-covid-19

260 https://www.delfi.lv/news/national/politics/viltus-zinas-homeopatijas-pozitivo-efektu-covid-19-profilakse-komente-infektologs.d?id=51968203

board members believe that calls to treat Covid-19 with homoeopathy are irresponsible, as there is currently no specific cure for the disease.[261]

c) Minister of Health has criticised those people who in the current circumstances spread false news or promote conspiracy theories. "To those who are spreading the word that Covid-19 is a fabrication and a government conspiracy, I want to say that if we believed such statements, we would still believe that the earth is flat because it cannot be seen with the naked eye," noted the minister.[262] It can be seen that the main emphasis is precisely on individual responsibility and not one of the platforms.

d) Latvia has been the initiator for an interregional announcement of the UN regarding the fight against misinformation in connection of Covid-19 (infodemics).[263]

e) In his address at the 75th United Nations Latvian President Egils Levits highlighted the scourge of disinformation. Levits said that Latvia is concerned that among other negative consequences, Covid-19 has created a breeding ground for misinformation, disinformation, fake news and hate speech. States must counter misinformation and provide access to free, reliable and science-based information through free media. Additionally, he noted that: "Technology companies and social media platforms need to be more accountable for addressing online disinformation. Social media is not merely a platform where people and diverse information meets. The technology, the algorithms, the business models that drive the advertising market and attention economy all play a large part in the distribution of disinformation. Our priority must be to protect both privacy and freedom of expression in the digital domain.The exponential increase of misinformation, disinformation, fake news and hate speech in recent years is dangerous not only in the context of the pandemic. It is a general threat to world peace; it is a general threat to efforts to solve global issues such as climate change and environmental pollution. In short – it is a general problem of humankind to find rational solutions to the challenges of our time. These threats should be taken seriously both on the national and international level".[264]

f) The leader of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre Jānis Sārts in October stated that currently, Latvia has an equal level of disinformation to other European countries (in comparison to spring when it was lower). Nevertheless, in his opinion, this mostly is not organised disinformation, rather more emotion-driven circulation of false information.[265]

g) Prime minister of Latvia Krišjānis Kariņš declared that the incitement not to wear face masks is a threat to national security. These incitements were mentioned exactly in connection to the spread of posts in the social networks informing people that they have no legal duty to wear the face masks and that they are even more dangerous than the virus. "There have been such people in all countries at all times, but with the help of the internet their message is much more accessible than it was 20 years ago, and that has created serious

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261 https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/zinu-analize/covid-19-un-viltus-zinas-valsts-policija-var-vertet-ari-krapsanas-uzdosanu-par-viedokli.a352781/

262 https://www.apollo.lv/7078481/vinkele-nepieciesamibas-gadijuma-ierobezojumi-tiks-ieviesti-tikai-pakapeniski

263 https://www.mfa.gov.lv/aktualitates/zinas/66119-latvijas-rosinatu-globalu-aicinajumu-cinai-pret-infodemiju-covid-19-laika-atbalsta-130-pasaules-valstu

264 https://www.leta.lv/eng/home/important/F8DB93AC-F098-4395-8016-B0FDA207B0BA/

265 https://skaties.lv/zinas/latvija/sarts-covid-19-otra-vilna-laika-palielinajusies-pasas-sabiedribas-izplatita-dezinformacija/

concerns," the prime minister said, adding that the majority of the public, however, does not listen to these people.[266]

h) To our knowledge, there have been no statements by platform representatives regarding Covid-19 connected disinformation in Latvia. However, in spring 2020 Jacob Turowski, Facebook's Head of Public Policy in the Baltics and Poland claimed: "We are pleased to launch our third-party fact-finding program in Latvia and Estonia and to expand it in Lithuania to include Re:Baltica and DELFI. We take a very responsible approach to the responsibility to fight false news, so we are continually looking for new ways to stop the spread of misinformation on our platform. "

Lithuania

The recommendations of the Strategic Communication Department of the Lithuanian Armed Forces were published on the dedicated website www.koronoastop.lt[267] and a reference to them weas provided on Facebook by the Government,[268] where the main recommendations were highlighted: to critically assess conspiracy theories on social media, to look for information on official websites of state institutions, to check controversial information in at least three sources.

Recommendations to check the news by consulting official website of state institutions, not to opt for social media as a primary source of information, to carefully select channels of information and to check controversial information in at least three sources were also published on the website of the Ministry of Health[269] where it was also advised how to identify a false account on social networks (a number of pages followed, mocking, insulting and provocative tone, language errors, links to game applications).

Representation of the European Commission in Lithuania on its website[270] and on its Facebook account[271] warned about the spreading, including via social networks, of disinformation about Covid-19 and directed towards official information as well as itself provided certain information about Covid-19.

It was repeated that the Commission urges Internet platforms to publish only reliable information,[272] to move down factually incorrect content and delete illegal content or content that could cause physical harm.

In an interview to Lithuanian Television, the head of the Representation of the European Commission in Lithuania also mentioned the importance of the Good Practice Code signed between the Commission and

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266 https://www.apollo.lv/7091080/karins-musinasana-nenesat-sejas-maskas-robezojas-ar-nacionalas-drosibas-apdraudejumu

267 https://koronastop.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/ekspertai-ispeja-daugeja-melagingos-informacijos-apie-koronavirusa-socialiniuose-tinkluose?fbclid=IwAR3ziVfG1FZs-IEPcLe_SSGNySTTFa5WY2aC7NlDeXbB7KGXSYIOQe8EWvw

268 https://www.facebook.com/LRVyriausybe/posts/10158511627053408, 06/05/2020

269 SAM įspėja: auga dezinformacijos kiekis, nukreiptas prieš kaukių dėvėjimą, 2020-09-17https://sam.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/sam-ispeja-auga-dezinformacijos-kiekis-nukreiptas-pries-kaukiu-devejima

270 https://ec.europa.eu/lithuania/news/eu-myths/figth_disinformation_covid-19_lt

271 https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=229013041681443, 17/04/2020

272 https://ec.europa.eu/lithuania/news/eu-myths/figth_disinformation_covid-19_lt

the Internet platforms, emphasized the role of those platforms and also favourably assessed the Lithuanian fact checking initiative "debunk.eu".[273]

The Office of the Inspector of Journalist Ethics published a statement on how to identify CIVD-19 related information and where to look for reliable information.[274]

Communications Regulatory Authority of the Republic of Lithuania (RRT) published an explanation about 5G reacting to disinformation about possible causes of Covid-19.[275]

Moldova

Until the presidential elections, for the government and the competent authorities of the Republic of Moldova, combating propaganda and fake news had not been a priority, especially since the politicians themselves used the media and confusing messages to manipulate voters and to impose their own agenda. While the authorities in Chisinau partially countered conspiracy theories, they did not respond at all to the anti-EU and anti-Western narratives promoted by Russian propaganda. The media and the civil society have been more active than high-level officials in communicating and combating propaganda during the COVID-19 pandemic.[276]

Thus, during the pandemic, most actions of media and civil society to combat fake news focused on uncovering myths and false information, publishing and disseminating materials containing accurate information, presenting the struggle of health workers in the front line - one of the sensitive topics of the pandemic – in order to urge the population to comply with the prevention measures. One of the most well-known initiatives for combating fake news is the platform of the Independent Press Association - Stopfals.md, which reacted promptly to the challenge and created a special section dedicated to fake news about COVID-19. In addition, many NGOs, websites and TV stations have tried to dismantle conspiracy theories and fake news.[277]

Norway

There do not appear to be any specific statements by platform representatives in Norway. There are, however, some politicians who have issued statements, as well as representatives of health institutions. In some cases, these were prompted by the reporting media themselves, whereas others (as in the case of the Minister of Defence) were issued on the initiative of the politician.

On 12 March, the Minister of Health and Care services, Bent Høie, warned about spreading disinformation about the virus. His warning was published i.a. by Norwegian broadcaster NRK: "We do not have a vaccine

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273 https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1193932/dezinformacija-karantino-metu-nuo-konspiraciniu-teoriju-apie-covid-19-kilme-iki-siulymu-nesiprausti, 01/07/2020

274 The Office of the Inspector of Journalist Ethics, Public Statement on Fake News (Žurnalistų etikos inspektoriaus tarnybos viešas pareiškimas dėl netikrų nujienų), 02/06/2020, http://www.zeit.lt/lt/naujienos/del-netikru-naujienu/543

275 RRT teikia išaiškinimus apie 5G, 27/04/20, https://www.rrt.lt/rrt-teikia-isaiskinimus-apie-5g/

276 Alexandru Damian, Vladlena Şubernițchi (Romanian Centre for European Policies). Disinformation and propaganda in the management of the COVID-19 crisis in the Republic of Moldova. July 2020, p. 9: https://www.crpe.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/CRPE_moldova_en-as-of-20.08.pdf

277 Idem.

against the virus, but we do not have a vaccine against fake news either. In the same way that you spread the virus by not washing your hands, you contribute to spreading uncertainty if you share false advise".[278]

Minister of Defence, Frank Bakke-Jensen, issued a similar warning on 15 April, as reported in national newspaper Verdens Gang (VG). Pointing out that the rivalisation between nations continued and that the threat to Norway from external forces had not been affected by the coronavirus, he quoted several instances of false information and voiced his concern that Norway may become the target of coordinated attempts to influence public opinion. "I note that many are spreading alternative theories for infection prevention and methods, graphs and numbers on social media. I would encourage sobriety, and it is smart to be sceptical".[279]

Press officer at the Oslo University Hospital, Anders Bayer, stated when asked by newspaper VG whether there were already Norwegian Covid-19 patients in January: "That is not correct. This is 'fake news'". Later, he continued: "At the emergency ward there is a great deal of irritation, and we are sad that some people find it entertaining to spread false rumors".[280]

Portugal (a)

A Portuguese politician, António Guterres, General-Secretary of the United Nations Organization, welcomed "journalists and all those who check the facts on the mountain of misleading stories and publications on social networks", adding that the large companies that own these networks must "do more to eliminate hatred and harmful statements related to Covid-19"

Then YouTube announced the release of informative videos to demystify rumors and disassemble dubious information, in particular on covid-19 pandemic.[281] Facebook launched a campaign against disinformation in Portugal, and surveys to assess what users have learned.[282]

Portugal (b)

In our country each organization has established contingency plans adapted to its reality within the general guidelines of the government and especially of the Directorate General of Health.[283]

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278 https://www.nrk.no/norge/hoie-advarer-mot-a-spre-falske-koronanyheter-1.14941228.

279 https://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/i/wPGgPP/forsvarsministeren-advarer-mot-falske-corona-nyheter.

280 https://www.vg.no/nyheter/utenriks/i/0nllXG/fake-news-om-coronaviruset-florerer.

281 https://sicnoticias.pt/especiais/coronavirus/2020-04-29-YouTube-divulga-videos-de-fact-check-sobre-Covid-19

282 https://expresso.pt/economia/2020-06-30-Facebook-lanca-campanha-contra-a-desinformacao-em-Portugal.-E-inqueritos-para-avaliar-o-que-os-utilizadores-aprenderam

283 https://covid19.min-saude.pt/
http://www.seg-social.pt/contactos4
https://www.portugal.gov.pt/pt/gc21/area-de-governo/ciencia-tecnologia-e-ensino-superior

Serbia

Commissioner for Information on Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, Milan Marinkovic, in his public statement, condemned Covid-19-related disinformation through social media and called citizens not to accept news spread through social media lightly but to check their authenticity as much as possible.[284]

The public appeal of the Government of the Republic of Serbia to the citizens to stop spreading Covid-19-related disinformation through social media is available on its official website on Covid-19.[285]

South Africa

In April 2020, Stephen Birch, a resident of Cape Town, posted a video online claiming that the Covid testing kits were themselves contaminated with Covid.[286] He was arrested and charged with spreading misinformation about Covid-19. The Western Cape provincial government issued a statement reassuring the public that Birch's information was false. On the same day, the provincial government of Kwa- Zulu Natal issued a press release reminding the public that it was an offence to disseminate false information about Covid, and asking members of the public to inform them if they discovered such information. News outlets reported the Western Cape government's debunking of Stephen Birch's video. President Cyril Ramaphosa denied reports that South Africa would return to a stricter lockdown on 27 October 2020. This was also widely reported in the media. When the media outlet 'News24' reported falsely that Bill Gates was proposing to test a vaccine on Africans, Member of Parliament Bantu Holomisa and Cabinet Member Fikile Mbalula called on News24 to discipline the journalist who had produced the false report. Politicians themselves have engaged in disputes with one another about Covid-related information. There is currently a dispute between the national Minister of Health and the Western Cape provincial government on the Covid levels in the province.[287]

Spain

While standard statements from politicians can be found stressing the misleading effects of Covid-19 related disinformation,[288] particular attention was given to the Minister of Interior admitting that the central government was monitoring the network 'checking speeches that may be dangerous or criminal' as well as disinformation campaigns[289]. Such a statement followed another where a high-ranked military

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284 http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a584326/Poverenik-apelovao-na-gradjane-da-proveravaju-informacije-sa-drustvenihmreza.html

285 https://covid19.rs/ne-sirite-neproverene-informacije/

286 https://www.cabc.org.za/reports/2020-04-09-mis-dis-information-careza-6th-april-2020/

287 https://ewn.co.za/2020/10/27/simply-not-true-that-sa-is-moving-back-to-lockdown-level-3-ramaphosa; https://www.iol.co.za/capetimes/news/mkhize-sticks-to-western-cape-covid-19-spike-claims-amid-dispute-97d734e0-2c1a-4505-82c0-52c3382caa0d; https://za.opera.news/za/en/crime/776ff7d5a61e9a23ad1a00cac6bb84b7.

288 https://www.elplural.com/politica/video-pedro-sanchez-alerta-proliferacion-bulos-coronavirus-pide-partidos-responsabilidad_237404102

289 https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20200411/48422426462/gobierno-monitoriza-redes-sociales-discursos-peligrosos-campanas-desinformacion-coronavirus.html

https://www.abc.es/espana/abci-marlaska-insiste-monitorizacion-redes-no-tiene-finalidad-politica-202004231706_video.html

official, acting as spokesperson of the Ministry, had admitted that such a strategy aimed at controlling messages potentially harmful for the "government"[290].

Opinions from headquarters are normally reproduced by local outlets and Spanish representatives also share their strategy [e.g. TW[291], FB or Google (7)]. Beyond such statements, messages directly related to the Spanish situation are rare, but a TW specific event was created gathering information coming from Spanish health authorities[292]. Moreover, given the vulnerability for cases of violence against women caused by Covid-19 lockdown, Spain was the second country worldwide to implement a TW alert containing official information and hot-lines. It is displayed for searches related to such topics[293]. On another note, Instagram clarified that a confusion existed on the origin of problems experienced by Covid19-related posts, whose author believed that the platform was blocking a survey. The platforms declared that there were just technical constraints related to the parameters applied to the survey[294].

290 https://www.elconfidencialdigital.com/blog/jose-apezarena/nos-controla-gran-hermano-mas-poderoso-nunca/20200420191506143324.html

291 https://twitter.com/TwitterEspana/status/1253004640771362817

https://blog.twitter.com/es_es/topics/company/2020/Covid190.html

For the overall TW policy on Covid-19, see:

https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/covid-19.html

292 https://twitter.com/i/events/1240673023692124160

293 https://twitter.com/TwitterEspana/status/1257944164874047488

294 https://maldita.es/malditatecnologia/2020/04/21/instagram-bloqueado-encuesta-gobierno-fernando-verdasco-fallo-tecnico/

https://www.lavanguardia.com/gente/20200701/482046477388/miguel-bose-denuncia-censura-twitter-bloqueo-coronavirus-polemica.html

Question 5: Can you find country-specific information on if, when and for how long the content-moderation workforce in your country has stopped its work during the pandemic and automated decision-making was increased? If yes, please cite the main points and indicate a source.

Albania:

Mr. Semini commented: "*That was the case during the two-month lockdown March-May period.*" However, it has not been possible to find specific information/data on this matter.

Mr. Semini also added that "due to the virus, e.g., all news conferences are held with limited numbers of journalists. Often news conferences are held online, a good way for any holder to avoid correct answers or play as they may like to."

Argentina

I haven't found specific information on this topic

Belgium

In Belgium, the content-moderation workforce, and in particular the DJSOC-i2-IRU unit of the federal police (see also *supra* question no. 4), did not stop its work during the pandemic. On the contrary, it appointed a team of 21 investigators to search specifically for Covid-19-related disinformation.[295] In August, it was reported that, since the beginning of the pandemic, 450 reports of disinformation had been reported to the various social media platforms, of which 237 were indeed removed.[296]

Bosnia and Herzegovina

I could not find any information that could be supported by a credible source.

Croatia

No.

Cyprus

No sources found.

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295 Peter Decroubele, 'Federale Politie Zet Speurders in Om "Fake News" Te Bestrijden: "Gevaar Voor Maatschappij"' VRT NWS (28 August 2020) <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2020/08/28/federale-politie-zet-speurders-in-om-fake-news-te-bestrijden/>.

296 'Politie Laat 237 Berichten Met "fake News" over Coronavirus van Sociale Media Halen' HLN (27 August 2020) <https://www.hln.be/binnenland/politie-laat-237-berichten-met-fake-news-over-coronavirus-van-sociale-media-halen~a4a32477/>.

Denmark

N/A

Estonia

There is no such information available.

Finland

No specific information on this point.

Germany

No Germany-specific numbers/coverage in this regard. "Neither TikTok nor YouTube or Twitter comment on how many content moderators are affected and how this affects the teams in Germany."[297]

Israel

There is no specific information regarding content moderation workforce in Israel

Italy

We don't think this was the case in Italy. By reading the Government's released documents it seems that this was not really the case. But we were not able to find specific information on that.

Latvia

No Latvia-specific numbers/coverage in this regard. However, the independent fact-checkers continued their work all through the time of the pandemic.

Lithuania

We cannot find such information in relation to the pandemic. However, debunk.eu (or demaskuok.lt) artificial intelligence-based fact-checking platform which started before the pandemic continued its work also during the pandemic. The artificial intelligence identifies potentially most harmful articles. Internet elves and journalists then examine them and rate them according to their harmfulness thus training the artificial intelligence. Journalists then react to some of the identified disinformation articles and publish their articles on mainstream news portals. The head of this initiative, Viktoras Daukšas, noted that Internet trolls produce so many articles that not all of them can be deconstructed.[298]

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297 https://www.sueddeutsche.de/digital/coronavirus-facebook-google-content-moderation-1.4859147-0

298 L. Keraitis, "Demaskuok.lt" vadovas: troliai tiek prirašo straipsnių, kad neįmanoma jų visų dekonstruoti, 13/06/2019, https://www.ziniuradijas.lt/laidos/skaitmeniniai-horizontai/demaskuok-lt-vadovas-troliai-tiek-priraso-straipsniu-kad-neimanoma-ju-visu-dekonstruoti?video=1

Moldova

No Moldova-specific numbers/coverage in this regard.

Norway

No Norway-specific numbers/coverage in this regard.

Portugal (a)

The "Polígrafo" (Polygraph) is an online journalistic project whose main objective is to ascertain the truth and not the lie in the public space. As of March 2, 2020, all content produced by the editorial staff of "Polígrafo" on coronavirus is scientifically validated by the Directorate-General for Health, the highest public health body in Portugal.[299] As of May 2020, the Whatsapp chatbot allows WhatsApp users to detect fake news about Covid-19 according to the International Fact Checking Network system. However, it is not available in Portuguese.[300]

Portugal (b)

In Portugal we had the general confinement period from 13 March to 26 May 2020. From 27 May to date we have been working on the hybrid system between Telework and Digital Work. Many organisations define this system as Mirror Work. The source are measures and guidelines issued by the Portuguese Government.[301]

Serbia

No Serbia-specific data related to this issue.

South Africa

No.

Spain

According to the interviewed fact checking companies[302], most of the platforms' efforts are global, although work teams have been strengthened in Spain or collaboration with local fact checkers has been promoted. Verification tasks did not come to a halt during the beginning of the crisis, but on the contrary, it seems

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299 https://www.dgs.pt/em-destaque/coronavirus-poligrafo-e-direcao-geral-da-saude-estabelecem-parceria-contra-as-fake-news.aspx, https://poligrafo.sapo.pt/

300 https://observador.pt/2020/05/04/embargo-nao-publicar-ha-um-robot-no-whatsapp-a-combater-fake-news-sobre-covid-19-e-o-observador-esta-a-ajuda-lo/

301 https://eportugal.gov.pt/

302 Source: interviews with representatives of the verification platforms. Unpublished.

that it forced the platforms to show greater concern. However, most automated efforts seem to be global: chat bots, tightening of the rules for content removal, etc.[303]

303 "Las redes sociales delegan en la automatización la retirada de contenidos por la Covid: por qué eliminan tu publicación aunque no incumpla normas", Maldita, April 28 2020

https://maldita.es/malditatecnologia/2020/04/28/redes-sociales-automatizacion-contenidos-normas

"Maldita.es se incorpora al programa de verificación externo de Facebook: 11 preguntas y respuestas sobre lo que vamos a hacer", Maldita, 12 March 2019

https://maldita.es/nosotros/2019/03/12/maldita-es-se-incorpora-al-programa-de-verificacion-externo-de-facebook-11-preguntas-y-respuestas-sobre-lo-que-vamos-a-hacer/, https://www.eldiario.es/tecnologia/youtube-censura-video-parodico-pantomima-full-negacionistas-coronavirus_1_6263109.html, https://twitter.com/Pantomima_Full/status/1311931279709962240

Question 6: Has Covid-19 related disinformation in your country targeted certain groups within your country or abroad as "scapegoats"/supposed "perpetrators" behind Covid-19? If yes, please name the group(s) targeted the most and indicate a source.

Albania

At the moment there are no comprehensive scientific studies how disinformation has further boosted existing prejudices. Nonetheless, Albanian Media Institute (AMI) reports that Covid-19 conspiracy theories, especially that of microchip vaccines (Bill Gates), are currently circulating in Albania. According to AMI, various conspiracy theories also found a place in the traditional media, as well as they were multiplied by the social media.[304] Prominent, for example, is the explanation for this pandemic as a kind of war of armies based in distant galaxies, and the coronavirus is a sophisticated weapon being used to reduce the Earth's population sevenfold. One side of the war has as its top representative on Earth President Trump, the good side, while on the other side, the evil, is, George Soros.[305]

Some media have also reported the opinions of Alfred Cako, publisher of several books on conspiracy, who stated in a TV show that Covid-19 is a biological weapon spread by the "Aryan Brotherhood", the result of a battle between the Illuminati and Donald Trump.[306]

Argentina

Mainly, in Argentina, we can see daily cross accusations made between politicians of the left and right, trying to generate popular discontent with their opponents and gain votes. Other example are accusations made by people linked to environmental movements, who raised concerns about the effects that 5G technology could have on the body and linked them to Covi-19disease. In Argentina, the first mentions appeared last February, with notes that analyzed these conspiracy theories in other countries and pointed out their falsehood. Unlike what happened in other countries, there was no strong activity against 5G in Argentina before the pandemic. Until February 2020, an analysis of Google searches (via the Google Trends tool) shows relatively little interest in 5G, but then the false theory that links the coronavirus with 5G arrived.[307]

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304 Albanian Media Institute. Covid -19 në media: dezinformacione dhe konspiracione. http://www.institutemedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Covid-19-në-media-dezinformacione-dhekonspiracione-converted-1.pdf

305 Albanian Media Institute. MBI TEORITE̤ E KONSPIRACIONIT DHE COVID 19http://www.institutemedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/MBI-TEORITE̤-E-KONSPIRACIONIT-DHE- COVID-19-.pdf ;

http://www.institutemedia.org/2020/08/10/mbi-teorite-e-konspiracionit-dhe-covid-19/

306 Albanian Media Institute. COVID -19 ne̤ media: dezinformacione dhe konspiracione. http://www.institutemedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/COVID-19-ne̤-media-dezinformacione-dhe- konspiracione-converted-1.pdf

307 https://chequeado.com/el-explicador/como-llego-y-que-grupos-difundieron-en-la-argentina-la-falsa-teoria-que-vincula-al-coronavirus-con-el-5g/

Belgium

In Belgium, Covid-19 related disinformation has targeted both the Muslim community and migrants as "scapegoats"/ supposed "perpetrators" behind Covid-19.

In a note[308], issued on April 21st, 2020, the State Security service found that a number of far-right groups engage in hate speech against Muslims (p. 3). The example given refers to a message published by the Frenchspeaking splinter party 'Nation' which stated that there was a so-called Fatwa calling infected Muslims to "cough in the faces of non-believers" (p. 3).

The same document also observed that right-wing extremists (whether or not using a pro-Russian discourse) claim that there is a link between the outbreak of the coronavirus and immigration (pp. 4-5). In particular, it holds that "[a] mixture of facts, fake news and far-right framing is used to make their message clear. It is the leading discourse of the far right on social media, with one common denominator: migration makes the outbreak of the coronavirus worse" (p. 4). Stating that there are numerous examples, the note specifically references statements made by the French-speaking far-right party Parti National Européen (PNE), a breakaway party of the abovementioned party 'Nation' (p. 4). More specifically, PNE described an asylum centre in Mouscron as being a source of infection for the surrounding area and demanded that that the centre should be closed, adding that "they (the asylum seekers) should all be accommodated in Parliament: the building does not serve any meaningful purpose anyway" (p. 4).

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The disinformation targeting certain groups could be found mostly on individual social media profiles, or clickbait titles with conspiracy theory related content. The groups mostly targeted were the Chinese, and Asians in general, who were blamed for artificially creating the virus, allowing it to escape from the laboratory, and not reacting in a timely manner to prevent it from spreading to other parts of the world. There are examples of stigmatisation and verbal attacks against Asian tourists that may be attributed to the spread of disinformation.[309] In relation to this, a report aired on a private TV station that is fairly popular country-wide showed a journalist reporting from the town of Konjic which had an increase in the number of positive cases, dressed in a fully body protective suit, referring to the city as a „Bosnian Wuhan".[310] This was perceived as the stigmatisation of the entire population of the town in question.

As in other countries, the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina were not immune to blaming Microsoft's Bill Gates for the situation with regards to the pandemic. Media outlets have tried to research about this issue and inform the public in an objective and accurate way, but social media and internet forums remained fruitful platforms for the spread of these theories.[311] The discussion around Bill Gates was often connected

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308 Veiligheid van de Staat - Sûreté de l'Etat (VSSE), 'The Hidden Danger behind Covid-19' (2020) Note
<https://www.vsse.be/sites/default/files/corona-uk-batpdf_0.pdf>.; https://www.brusselstimes.com/belgium/110431/extremist-groups-are-using-coronavirus-to-pump-fake-news-on-social-media-report-warns/

309https://globalanalitika.com/korona-virus-osim-panike-donio-stigmu-i-sirenje-dezinformacija/ accessed on 7 October 2020.

310 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q76Rit6Icso

311 https://forum.klix.ba/teorije-zavjera-bre-pa-opletite-t157708.html?sid=760a378f87eb4583033e11b0feab1b5f

to the allegations of health hazards of the 5G technology, with statements that the pandemic is only used as a cover up for the adoption of the 5G.[312]

There was some media reporting and social media posts about irregular migrants' camps as hotspots of coronavirus infection, which triggered additional stigmatisation of this group. Some sensationalistic media reporting about migrants' camps in Italy that were identified as the biggest European hotspots of infection additionally fuelled the spread of disinformation.[313]

Despite the fact that the society of BiH is deeply polarized along the ethnic lines of three dominant (constituent) groups (Bosniak, Serb, Croat) whose political representatives tend to place blame on other groups for various challenges the country has been facing since the war ended in 1995, there has been no scapegoating of other ethnic groups with regards to the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has had "a paradoxical effect on the political dynamics"[314] in the country which is quite nationalism-prone, at least if the political rhetoric is assessed.

Croatia

Not to my knowledge. There was a certain stigma against people who were tested positive.

Cyprus

6. Even though there are not tangible elements about the impact of Covid-19-related disinformation on certain social groups, it is admitted that social vulnerable groups, such as homeless and minorities as well as people from Asia or Africa, are the victims of this situation. As it has been explicitly written, "Chinese people have been excluded, albeit temporarily, from the wider world and have been characterized as the different Others. Every Chinese is suspicious of carrying the deadly disease so their social exclusion is legitimized" (Argyriadis, A., & Argyriadi, A. (2020). Socio-Cultural Discrimination and the Role of Media in the Case of the Coronavirus: Anthropological and Psychological Notes through a Case Study. International Journal of Caring Sciences, 13(2), 1449).

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312 A 10-minute video uploaded on a Facebook private account by a person from bosina and Herzegovina who was shown to possess no medical or any other relevant expertise on the coronavirus, contained justifications for theories relating to Bill and Melinda Gates, 5G technology, etc. The video went viral with over 500,000.000 views across South-Eastern Europe. Numerous local and regional platforms shared the video thus enabling it to reach wider audiences. https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/erna-selimovic-internetska-senzacija-bez-ijedne-tacne-tvrdnje-o-koronavirusu, accessed on 7 October

313 http://ba.n1info.com/Vijesti/a423697/Migrantima-zabranjeno-kretanje.html

https://vijesti.ba/clanak/503979/iz-izolatorija-u-krajini-pobjegao-migrant-zarazen-koronavirusom

https://uskvijesti.ba/centar-za-migrante-postao-najvece-zariste-korone-u-italiji/, accessed on 7 October 2020

314 Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) Report: The Western Balkans in times of the global pandemic, April 2020, p. 16. https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/BiEPAG-Policy-Brief-The-Western-Balkans-in-Times-of-the-Global-Pandemic.pdf, accessed on 9 October 2020.

Denmark

The nationalistic parties "the Danish Peoples Party" and "the New order party" incriminate people from non-western background and the spread of the coronavirus in Denmark, although the hardest-hit municipalities are of Danish origin.[315] "Meat-eaters" have been attacked as well.[316]

Estonia

As mentioned above, there is anti-foreigner rhetoric used in Covid-19 disinformation. Several news items on uueduudised.ee emphasise the role of foreigners (e.g. international students or foreign farm workers) in spreading the disease.[317]

Finland

Finland has received similar disinformation as the rest of the EU. Finnish government has collected monthly summary on Covid 19, which always includes section on disinformation.[318]

Germany

Covid-19 has boosted existing prejudices. Although there are at the moment no comprehensive scientific studies, media reports show that the virus has been included in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories[319] and reinforced racist discrimination in Germany, especially against people of Asian descent.[320] Another prominent myth is the involvement of Bill and Melinda Gates.[321]

Israel

Covid-19 had increased racist discrimination towards Asian people in Israel, this has to do with one of the greater conspiracies regarding Covid-19 in Israel, whereby the coronavirus is a biological weapon developed by China.[322]

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315 https://www.berlingske.dk/danmark/vermund-i-kraftig-kritik-af-smittede-indvandrere-det-er-fuldstaendig

316 https://www.tjekdet.dk/faktatjek/havde-vi-undgaaet-coronavirus-ved-alle-sammen-vaere-veganere

317 https://uueduudised.ee/uudis/eesti/eesti-koroonakollete-omaparaks-on-internatsionaalne-paritolu-sedapuhku-on-mangus-poola-voortooline/, https://uueduudised.ee/uudis/eesti/korgkool-ei-lainud-pollumeeste-teed-tehnikaulikool-loobub-koroonariskiriikidest-parit-uutest-valistudengitest/ , https://uueduudised.ee/uudis/eesti/pollumajanduskoda-toob-erilennukiga-koroonakoldest-inimesed-eestisse/ , https://uueduudised.ee/uudis/eesti/ukraina-toolised-viisid-torva-valda-koroonaviiruse/ .

318 https://tietokayttoon.fi/covid-19-tutkimuskatsaukset

319 https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/mensch-metropole/schaemt-ihr-euch-nicht-ihr-juden-75-antisemitische-vorfaelle-mit-corona-bezug-in-berlin-li.103473; https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/br-recherche/corona-antisemitismus-101.html

320 https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/coronavirus-diskriminierung-rassismus-asiaten-100.html; https://www.mdr.de/thueringen/ost-thueringen/corona-rassismus-angriffe-asiaten-100.htmlhttps://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/attacken-gegen-asiaten-bundesregierung-ignoriert-corona-rassismus/25798536.html

321 https://www.fr.de/politik/corona-krise-bill-gates-virus-verbindungen-who-verschwoerung-13759001.html

322 https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-coronavirus-inflames-israel-s-endemic-dehumanizing-anti-asian-racism-problem-1.8566069

Italy

There have been episodes of accusation against Asian tourists.[323] Other cases have been registered against migrants, especially those who trespass illegally the country borders.[324] Other cases have been shown concerning Italians abroad, especially in the early months of the pandemic, as resulting from a declaration of the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs.[325]

More generally, some studies show that subjects prone to depression, disappointment, suspicion, and religious fundamentalism are targeted by those who distribute fake news. This, in turn, contributed to the scapegoat phenomenon described above.[326] This seems to be the case in Italy as well, but also age plays a relevant role.[327]

Latvia

Surveys reveal that approximately half of the citizens of Latvia believe that Covid-19 was created in the laboratory[328], presumably either in the USA[329] or China. Although at the moment there are no comprehensive scientific studies, comments at the articles on Covid-19 reveal racist slogans against the people from Asia.[330] Also the distributor of fake news Niks Endziņš in his posts of January 2020 asked for "elimination" of China and its citizens in connection to their "role" in the spreading of the new virus.[331] Additionally, many users are convinced that the pandemic is a project of Bill Gates in order to chip the people or get financial benefits.[332]

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323 https://www.lastampa.it/cronaca/2020/02/02/news/coronavirus-da-casapound-ai-campi-di-calcio-il-razzismo-e-di-casa-in-italia-1.38415778

324 https://www.amnesty.it/migranti-casi-dimportazione-e-covid-19-si-evitino-stigma-e-discriminazione/

325 https://stream24.ilsole24ore.com/video/italia/coronavirus-maio-basta-discriminazione-gli-italiani/ADsiRUB

326 Bronstein, M.V.; Pennycook, G.; Bear, A.; Rand, D.G.; Cannon, T.D. Belief in Fake News is Associated with Delusionality, Dogmatism, Religious Fundamentalism, and Reduced Analytic Thinking. J. Appl. Res. Mem. Cogn. 2019

327 Fake News and Covid-19 in Italy: Results of a Quantitative Observational, Andrea Moscadelli, Giuseppe Albora, Massimiliano Alberto Biamonte, Duccio Giorgetti, Michele Innocenzio, Sonia Paoli, Chiara Lorini,Paolo Bonanni and Guglielmo Bonaccorsi, Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health 2020, 17(16), 5850; https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/17/16/5850/htm#B54-ijerph-17-05850

328 https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/aptauja-katrs-otrais-latvijas-iedzivotajs-uzskata-ka-covid-19-ir-maksligi-radits-laboratorija.a378036/

329 https://rebaltica.lv/2020/03/atminudens-tirgotajs-maldina-par-koronavirusu/

330 https://www.diena.lv/raksts/latvija/zinas/aptauja-katrs-otrais-latvijas-iedzivotajs-uzskata-ka-covid-19-maksligi-radits-laboratorija-14250031/comments/, https://neatkariga.nra.lv/ekonomika/latvija/311389-zalu-razotaji-pandemija-bus-grudiens-investet-zinatne-un-medicina/komentari

331. https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/par-etniska-naida-izraisisanu-apcietinats-niks-endzins.a347079/

332 https://rebaltica.lv/2020/03/atminudens-tirgotajs-maldina-par-koronavirusu/

Lithuania

NATO troops, especially African American service personnel among American troops, but also German troops were portrayed as those spreading the disease.[333] Bill Gates[334] and 5G[335] were also mentioned.

Moldova

In Moldova among other fake stories, it has been suggested that former Prime Minister Maia Sandu asked the EU to impose an embargo on Moldovan products, and alleged that Moldova and Armenia are subjected to total aggression led by the "George Soros Monster", and that Coronavirus is just a lie.[336]

The Republic of Moldova was exposed to two main narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic[337]: a widespread circulation of conspiracy theories and the use of the health crisis by Russia and, secondarily, by China to promote their own agendas and to undermine European solidarity.

A significant number of media websites, marginal politicians, but also conspiracy movements already present in Chisinau or religious figures disseminated conspiracy theories refuting the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the most "popular" theories heavily circulated in the Republic of Moldova include: the link between the COVID-19 pandemic and the installation of 5G antennas meant to subsequently control the population, nanochipping of the population by vaccination, or the existence of a global conspiracy, led by Bill Gates, aimed at decimating the population. A series of articles by Report.md revealed the considerable influence of these narratives on the population. A recent analysis by WatchDog.md points out that at least 1 in 3 Moldovans believes one of these theories[338].

Norway

There have not been any attempts to target specific groups within Norway, at least not by mainstream media. Early in the pandemic, a story was spread that the virus was a biological weapon produced by the

333 Ekspertas apie Covid-19 ir dezinformaciją: pandemija atgaivino visas senąsias sąmokslo teorijas, 2020-09-26, https://www.lrt.lt/mediateka/irasas/2000122788/ekspertas-apie-covid-19-ir-dezinformacija-pandemija-atgaivino-visas-senasias-samokslo-teorijas; Kariuomenės ekspertai: dezinformacijos srautas socialiniuose tinkluose nemažėja, 2020-05-25, https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/kariuomenes-ekspertai-dezinformacijos-srautas-socialiniuose-tinkluose-nemazeja.d?id=84366943

334 E. Jakilaitis, Propagandos dekonstrukcijos, Delfi TV, https://www.delfi.lt/multimedija/dekontrukcijos/propagandos-dekonstrukcijos-apie-covid-19-kurpiamos-samokslo-teorijos-gali-kainuoti-gyvybe.d?id=85332173

335 The Office of the Inspector of Journalist Ethics, Public Statement on Fake News (Žurnalistų etikos inspektoriaus tarnybos viešas pareiškimas dėl netikrų nujienų), 02/06/2020, http://www.zeit.lt/lt/naujienos/del-netikru-naujienu/543

336 Tinatin Akhvlediani. Which spreads faster in the EU's neighbourhood: Coronavirus or disinformation ? 3 DCFTAs Op-ed No 13/2020, April 2020, p. 2.

https://3dcftas.eu/op-eds/which-spreads-faster-in-the-eu%E2%80%99s-neighbourhood-coronavirus-or-disinformation

337 Alexandru Damian, Vladlena Șubernițchi (Romanian Centre for European Policies). Disinformation and propaganda in the management of the COVID-19 crisis in the Republic of Moldova. July 2020, p. 3: https://www.crpe.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/CRPE_moldova_en-as-of-20.08.pdf

338 MAI 2020 and OCTOBER 2020. Impactul dezinformării în contextul pandemiei (Ro) / MAY 2020 The impact of misinformation in the context of the pandemic https://www.watchdog.md/2020/05/21/rezultatele-sondajului-realizat-la-comanda-watchdog-md-denota-un-impact-puternic-al-pandemiei-asupra-preferintelor-politice-si-gradului-de-incredere-in-teorii-conspirologice/

USA to impact the Chinese economy. This was one of the cases that caused the Minister of Defence to warn against targeted misinformation campaigns directed at Norway.[339]

The Norwegian government has recently become a target, not as a perpetrator or scapegoat behind Covid-19 per se, but for using Covid-19 restrictions to push a political agenda and increase their power. On Sunday 25 October, approximately 150 people gathered in front of the parliament to protest the government's handling of the Covid-19. The initiator of the protests, Nader Eide, believes the pandemic is a bluff, pre-planned and that face masks do not work.[340]

Portugal (a)

The "theory" of the "Chinese virus" has been widely diffused and echoed by Portuguese media.[341]

Serbia

Covid-19 related disinformation is very often connected with prejudices and conspiracy theories. The person most often mentioned in Serbia as the culprit for the pandemic is Bill Gates, Microsoft's founder.[342] Some disinformation is racist-based, targeting in particular migrants, while some Covid-19 related prejudices are political, as is a belief that 'NATO wants to destroy Serbia.'[343] There are also allegations of the connection between 5G networks and the Corona virus pandemic.[12]

South Africa

Targets of misinformation include China, the USA, Bill Gates and the 'Illuminati'. The misinformation on social media includes claims that: Covid-19 was manufactured as a bio-weapon in China; Covid was manufactured as a bio-weapon in the United States of America; Bill Gates has proposed to test his vaccines in Africa, thus using Africa as 'laboratory rats'; Bill Gates engineered Covid in order to force everybody to submit to a vaccination. When the vaccination is carried out, a microchip will be inserted into every vaccinated person; Bill Gates invented either the virus or the vaccine in order to kill Africans, as he wants to 'depopulate' Africa; Covid-19 was created by the 'New World Order' or 'Illuminati' in order to dominate the globe. There has also been hostility expressed at the government itself, for its lockdown regulations, and the tracing app that it has introduced.[344]

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339 https://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/i/wPGgPP/forsvarsministeren-advarer-mot-falske-corona-nyheter.

340 https://www.tv2.no/a/11732627/.
https://www.dagsavisen.no/nyheter/innenriks/150-personer-demonstrerte-mot-myndighetenes-smitteverntiltak-1.1792017;
https://www.faktisk.no/artikler/jjR/planlegger-forste-norske-demonstrasjon-mot-koronatiltak.

341 https://observador.pt/2020/05/03/provas-enormes-de-que-virus-veio-de-laboratorio-chines-garante-secretario-de-estado-dos-eua-mike-pompeo/

342 https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/svet-52150075

343 For more see FakeNews tragač, "Korona virus Infodemija u Srbiji" , supra note 2, p. 11. https://www.danas.rs/svet/teorije-zavere-o-virusu-i-tajnim-planovima-za-dominaciju-svetom/ See, e.g. the following: https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/uz-korona-virus-i-epidemija-laznih-vesti/

http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a583347/Uhapsen-zbog-laznih-vesti-u-vezi-sa-virusom-i-pretnji-na-Fejsbuku

344 https://www.cabc.org.za/reports/2020-04-09-mis-dis-information-careza-6th-april-2020/ https://www.cabc.org.za/reports/2020-04-09-mis-dis-information-careza-5th-april-2020/; https://www.news24.com/news24/Analysis/fact-check-how-a-lie-about-bill-gates-and-a-vaccine-for-the-

Spain

In the networks, disinformation statements range from the virus arising as a result of a plot to destroy humanity to a way of getting benefits[345], pointing to alleged links between the pandemic and 5G as a pretext to establish the global domain in which the attacked group are economic elites (p. 39)[346]. Bill Gates is accused as an outsider of a plot that intends to control the world with a chip[347]. He receives accusations from popular Spanish singers such as Miguel Bosé and Bunbury (Enrique Ortiz de Landázuri Izarduy)[348]. As an internal agent, the Spanish government has also been accused as the "sole responsible for the deaths, (...) it had destroyed the Spanish economy by locking up the population, giving rise to an infodemic of hoaxes."[349] Likewise, youth has been accused as a propagating agent of the virus: "the current stigmatizing discourse of youth and the night shows the inability of an adult-centered society to propose scenarios for the future and possibility that can counteract the boredom of a generation."[350]

Finally, within denialist movements or those that support conspiracy theories, the anti-vaccine movements have a large role and some of the public figures already mentioned are part of them. Besides, denialist theses seem to be supported bygroups with extreme ideologies (left and right)[351].

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coronavirus-exploded-on-twitter-20200407; https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-09-20-disinformation-in-a-time-of-covid-19-weekly-trends-in-south-africa-10/

345 Antonio Guterrez. United Nations. Retrieved from https://www.un.org/es/coronavirus/articles/informacion-veraz-salva-vidas

346 Lieutenant Colonel Vicente Diaz de Villegas Roig from SEGENPOL Cabinet. Spanish Defense Magazine. Retrieved from https://www.defensa.gob.es/Galerias/gabinete/red/2020/07/p-38-40-red-379-desinformacion.pdf

347 El País Twitter. 6-6-2020. Accusation of plot to control the world with a chip. Recovered from: https://elpais.com/elpais/2020/05/28/planeta_futuro/1590656256_768938.html

348 El Mundo. Angel Díaz. 15-6-2020. Accusations of Miguel Bose and Bunbury to Bill Gates. Recovered from https://www.elmundo.es/papel/lideres/2020/06/15/5ee7b8dafdddff96148b4576.html

349 Huffington Post Spain. Marcel Obst 31.5.2020. https://www.huffingtonpost.es/entry/por-que-la-desinformacion-es-mas-rapida-y-eficiente_es_5ed285ecc5b66e04b2885269

350 The conversation ES (edición España). Iñigo Sánchez-Fuarro, Cristiana Pirres y Jordi Nofre. 24-09-2020. Recuperado de https://theconversation.com/covid-19-son-los-jovenes-los-nuevos-chivos-expiatorios-145061

351 Source: interviews with representatives of the verification platforms. Unpublished.

Question 7: Have there been court cases on Covid-19-related content that was removed or not removed, including health-related disinformation and information related to protests?

Albania

To the information available thus far, there are no court cases on Covid-19-related content.

During the pandemic period, the government in Albania imposed forgiveness of fines for 7100 citizens. The Technical Committee of Experts serves as a reference point for institutions and the public. The Technical Committee submits public reports which are made available, offers analysis of the situation, conducts press conferences and official recommendations which serve as a basis for any decision-making process.[352] Covid-19 has had to some extent an impact on the activity of the judicial system, however measures to ensure continuation are put in place.[353]

Argentina

Not yet in Argentina as far as I know.

Belgium

No. The Belgian courts seem to mainly focus on the offline enforcement of the restrictions taken to contain the virus. As such, a man who was caught violating the corona rules no less than fourteen times had to appear in court.[354] As part of the most recent measures taken (16 October 2020), several business owners affected by the closure of the bars and restaurants over the next four weeks also announced that they would refer their case to the Council of State and call for an accelerated review of this measure.[355]

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Freedom of expression online is still not specifically regulated across the country, which makes it almost impossible for authorities to regulate the spread of disinformation or hate speech online. Criminal prosecution is usually limited to the offence of inciting religious and ethnic hatred through the internet or social networks.

As a result, there have been no cases of the removal the removal of the Covid – 19- related content. There are, however, some examples of misdemeanour warrants issued against individuals for violating laws on

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352 For more information visit the webpage of the Ministry of Health and Social Protection at: https://new.shendetesia.gov.al

353 http://klgj.al/covid-19/

354 Yves Barbieux, "Veertien keer werd hij al betrapt op een overtreding van de coronaregels, nu moet hij voor de rechter verschijnen", Het Nieuwsblad (8 May 2020), https://www.nieuwsblad.be/cnt/dmf20200508_04950986>; Ingrid Depraetere, "Eerste veroordelingen voor niet-naleven coronamaatregelen", Het Nieuwsblas (26 June 2020), <https://www.nieuwsblad.be/cnt/dmf20200626_05002077>; Belga, "Rechtbank spreekt celstraffen uit voor corona-overtreders", <https://www.focus-wtv.be/nieuws/rechtbank-spreekt-celstraffen-uit-voor-corona-overtreders>.

355 Gabriela Galindo, "Belgian restaurants will fight 'discriminatory' coronavirus shutdown in court", The Brussels Times (19 October 2020), <https://www.brusselstimes.com/belgium/136576/belgian-restaurants-will-fight-forced-shutdown-in-court-horeca-employer-business-owners-federations-cafes-bars-horeca-discriminatory-overturn-reversal-court-council-state/ >.

public peace and order and the law decrees enacted in Republika Srpska to fight the transmission of information that may cause panic or severely violate public peace and order by spreading "fake news" about the virus in the media and on social networks. [356]

Croatia

By June 2020 there have been 32 charges brought for spreading fake news about Covid 19.[357] In Croatia it is a criminal act (misdemeanour).

Cyprus

7. Not to our knowledge. But we shall re-underline the survey on posts on social media networks and news sites claiming that the pandemic is essentially a conspiracy, urging people to refuse to accept fines and sanctions and to disobey restrictions to contain a further spread. This act consists an infringement of specific provisions of the Penal Code of the Republic of Cyprus.

Denmark

No that we are aware of.

Estonia

There is no such information available.

Finland

No.

Germany

Not to our knowledge. All adjudication available at this time is heavily centered around the offline consequences of and protection measures against the pandemic, i.e. bans on demonstrations and other social gatherings and closing businesses. However, there are some media reports on the prosecution of Covid-19 "skeptics", who may have committed a criminal offence pursuant to § 111 (1) StGB (public provocation to commit an offence) by rallying for prohibited protests.[358] There may be a larger number of these kinds of offences and, consequentially, deletions of unlawful content as a reaction to government requests. It will be interesting to see whether the takedown numbers under Germany's NetzDG, the Network Enforcement Act, will substantially increase.

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356 Specific examples can be provided if necessary.

357 https://www.novilist.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/32-prijave-za-sirenje-laznih-vijesti-o-koroni-u-hrvatskoj/

358 https://www.presseportal.de/blaulicht/pm/14915/4564446; https://www.rnz.de/nachrichten/heidelberg_artikel,-demo-fuer-beate-bahner-polizei-identifiziert-bislang-32-personen-updatevideo-_arid,508747.html

Israel

Not yet, but according to several media reports, the State Attorney's Office is considering prosecute citizens who sent false messages to other citizens on the behalf of Ministry of Health.[359] In addition the police is investigating over 50 citizens regarding spreading disinformation about Covid-19.[360]

Italy

Not yet

Latvia

On 30 July 2020 the Criminal Court approved the agreement between the prosecutor and the accused regarding the commission of the criminal offence provided for in Section 231, Paragraph 1 of the Criminal Law. The criminal act - disturbance of public order, manifested in an apparent disrespect for society, ignoring generally accepted norms of behaviour and disrupting the work of human beings and institutions (hooliganism) – was carried out by posting fake news, among other things, regarding Covid-19, on a specifically created webpage.[361] The journalists had investigated that the distribution of these articles happens mostly on Facebook, where the primary sharers are fake profiles.[362] However, the decision does not contain any restrictions regarding the website as such or any comments regarding the distribution of these news in social networks.

As a reaction to these news several Saeima deputies prompted creating new Criminal law norms, which would provide for criminal liability for distributing fake news with financial intents.[363] Additionally, in January 2020 another distributor of fake news Niks Endziņš published on his Facebook profile a video in wish he states that the first patient with Covid-19 has already entered Latvia and notes that "in general, the Chinese [censored] should be eliminated, their country needs to be eliminated." While the publisher of the video was arrested for inciting national and ethnic hate in the social media, the video was taken off from his page after his own initiative or through the actions of social media monitoring teams[364], without a need for a specific court decision.

Lithuania

We cannot identify such cases.

359 https://www.calcalist.co.il/local/articles/0,7340,L-3809098,00.html, https://www.calcalist.co.il/local/articles/0,7340,L-3805191,00.html

360 https://news.walla.co.il/item/3352678

361 ECLI:LV:RLPT:2020:0730.11816002020.2.S

362 https://nra.lv/latvija/303767-melu-zinu-izplatisanu-kliksku-lapas-ta-ari-nav-izdevies-apturet.htm

363 https://nra.lv/latvija/303767-melu-zinu-izplatisanu-kliksku-lapas-ta-ari-nav-izdevies-apturet.htm

364 https://www.delfi.lv/news/national/criminal/viltus-zinu-biznesmenis-niks-endzins-pagaidam-paliks-apcietinajuma.d?id=51898109

Moldova

No information in this regard.

Norway

There do not seem to have been any such cases in Norway to date.

Portugal

The Portuguese Regulatory Authority of Media has issued an alert to all establishments providing healthcare, intervening in health advertising practices and to users in general, about misleading advertising or undermining users' rights, recalling, in particular, that advertising practices are prohibited in that conceal, mislead or deceive about the main characteristics of the act or service, that falsely refer to demonstrations or guarantees of cure or results or without adverse or secondary effects or that induce users to unnecessary, harmful or undiagnosed consumption or previous evaluation by a qualified professional.[365]

Serbia

To our knowledge, no court decision on Covid-19-related disinformation has been delivered. Media has reported several arrests and investigating proceedings against persons who may have committed a criminal offense under Article 343 of the Serbian Criminal Code (Causing Panic and Disorder by disclosing or disseminating untrue information or allegations through media or at the public gathering).[13]

South Africa

We cannot find any court cases relating to information about Covid. There are a number of Covid-related court cases, but most of these relate to the anti-Covid measures taken by government and not Covid itself, and, once again, do not deal with information about these measures. The court challenges have criticised the lockdown regulations as irrational, too strict or too lenient; some have claimed an exemption from the regulations and others have dealt with financial relief for loss of income due to the lockdown. There have been several claims against the law enforcement officials, which include the National Defence Force of the country.[366]

Spain

Regarding Court cases related to the removal of Covid-19 related information from social platforms, a Spanish citizen was brought to Court on the basis of a YouTube video where he declared that he was arriving from Madrid to Torrevella (Alacant) and wanted people living there to be infected. As an interim measure and given the menace to the public safety, the judge retained his passport and forced him to leave

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365 https://www.ers.pt/pt/covid-19/

366 For a list of Covid related court cases see: http://www.saflii.org/cgi-bin/sinosrch-adw.cgi?query=Covid-19%20or%20coronavirus%20;submit=Search;view=database-natural;offset=0 (NB: not all of these cases are challenges to the government measures against Covid).

the city[367]. A similar case occurred in Ceuta where a person spread via Facebook false information about a worrisome Covid-19 situation in the local prison.[368] A 360€ fine was imposed on the grounds of defamation of civil servants.

Along these lines, the Spanish Public Attorney (*Fiscalía*) released a report where Covid-19 related disinformation was connected to different criminal offences[369] and the police, initiated proactive investigations in this regard (see declarations in Andalucia[370]).

Beyond the judiciary, actions have been taken by the public administration through other means. The Catalan Audiovisual Commission (CAC) requested the removal of 16 YouTube vídeos and the platform proceeded accordingly with 14 of such cases[371]. Moreover, an agreement was signed between CAC and regional health authorities aiming at addressing health disinformation on all media including platforms[372]. The *Guardia Civil*, one of the Spanish police corps, created a special email account for Covid-19 frauds[373].

There are also instances (e.g. YouTube[374]) where the removal has been approved by the platforms themselves with no prior institutional intervention.

367https://elpais.com/politica/2020/04/15/diario_de_espana/1586960816_544134.html

http://www.poderjudicial.es/stfls/TRIBUNALES%20SUPERIORES%20DE%20JUSTICIA/TSJ%20Comunidad%20Valenciana/JURISPRUDENCIA/Jdo%20Instrucci%C3%B3n%201%20Torrevieja%2011%20abril%202020.pdf

https://cadenaser.com/emisora/2020/04/09/radio_alicante/1586447672_860640.html

https://twitter.com/guardiacivil/status/1248270667818119170

368 https://elfarodeceuta.es/condena-ceuta-carcel-estado-alarma/

369 https://www.europapress.es/nacional/noticia-fiscalia-identifica-decena-delitos-puede-incurrir-difusion-bulos-20200417171249.html

370 https://elforodeceuta.es/delegada-ordena-investigacion-detener-bulos-redes-sociales-whatsapp/

371 https://www.cac.cat/es/actualitat/youtube-retira-14-videos-denunciados-cac-promocionar-tratamientos-no-cientificos-curar

372 https://comunicacio21.cat/noticies/salut-i-el-cac-collaboren-per-combatre-la-desinformacio/

373 http://www.interior.gob.es/prensa/noticias/-/asset_publisher/GHU8Ap6ztgsg/content/id/11650383

https://elpais.com/espana/2020-09-04/la-fiscalia-no-ve-delito-en-los-bulos-contra-el-gobierno-por-la-gestion-de-la-covid-19-difundidos-por-redes-sociales.html

374 https://www.niusdiario.es/sociedad/sanidad/youtube-veta-videos-biologa-negacionista-coronavirus-marina-castells_18_3015345088.html

Question 8: Has there been a discussion in your country on how private actors can (or should) enforce public rules (laws) in relation to Covid-19?

Note: In Germany, there was a discussion on whether the railway company can enforce mask-wearing obligations which were provided not in their terms of service but by local and regional laws. Railway employees argued that they could not enforce the norms, but would only be able to call for police at the next stop.

Albania

There are calls made by the Prime Minister of Albania calling on the individual and public contribution to fight against Covid-19.[375]

There is unfortunately a political debate on the use of the masks. The opposition leader of one of the parties, calls on all Albanians to not implement the decision and to not wear masks in a challenge to the government in place.[376] Nonetheless, there have been widespread calls from different health personnel pushing forward the usage of masks. In this regard, fines are introduced which vary from 3,000ALL the first time to 5,000ALL the second time and the money is collected through the family's monthly power consume bill.

In the private sector, the government introduced some rules and measures for masks, social distancing, disinfectants and the way to organize the studies. Specifically, a protocol of security was created putting an obligation on all the public and private institutions. Some of the provisions taken by the government, especially by the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth, regarding both private education institutions and private high education institutions are:

Common guide for home learning due to the situation created by the spread of Covid-19 which provide platforms for online teaching and the modalities of online teaching (30.03.2020).[377]

Guidelines on the mandatory use of masks outdoors, which means the enforceability of this order for public and private education institutions.[378]

Argentina

Yes, for example regarding measures that impact on labor law.[379] But there are no court cases yet.

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375 https://kryeministria.al/en/newsroom/respektimi-i-rregullave-kontribut-individual-e-publik-ne-luften-anticovid/

376 https://www.botasot.info/shqiperia/1401503/monika-kryemadhi-zbulon-arsyen-pse-rama-vendosi-maskatme-detyrim/

377 www.arsimi.gov.al

378 www.shendetesia.gov.al

379 http://www.saij.gob.ar/nicolas-francisco-barbier-coronavirus-covid-19-aplicacion-medidas-impactan-derecho-laboral-dacf200052-2020-04-06/123456789-0abc-defg2500-02fcanirtcod?&o=3&f=Total%7CFecha%7CEstado+de+Vigencia%5B5%2C1%5D%7CTema%5B5%2C1%5D%7COrganismo%5B5%2C1%5D%7CAutor%5B5%2C1%5D%7CJurisdicci%F3n%5B5%2C1%5D%7CTribunal%5B5%2C1%5D%7CPublicaci%F3n%5B5%2C1%5D%7CColecci%F3n+tem%E1tica%5B5%2C1%5D%7CTipo+de+Documento%2FDoctrina&t=20

Belgium

In Belgium, there has been little discussion on how private actors can (or should) enforce public rules (laws) in relation to Covid-19.

Indeed, at the time when the wearing of mouth masks in stores became mandatory, former Prime Minister, Sophie Wilmès, said that: "From the beginning of the crisis, we have seen that the Belgian people follow the rules. I expect nothing else today. The shopkeepers shouldn't play policeman. We count on the common sense of the people".[380] At the same time, she stated that the rule would be enforced: "There may be a fine if you do not follow that measure".[381]

It may also be mentioned that the municipal council of Knokke-Heist complained that the railway company, the NMBS/SNCB, did not sufficiently enforce the applicable mask-wearing obligations, accusing it of consciously organizing the export of Covid-19 to the seaside.[382] A spokesperson of the NMBS/SNCB – which, in any case, is a state-owned company – countered that: "Wearing a mouth mask has been mandatory since 4 May. This is checked by our people and by the railway police. There is also a major awareness-raising campaign going on".[383]

Bosnia and Herzegovina

There is an ongoing discussion on how recommendations and obligations to implement various epidemiological measures (social-distancing, wearing of masks, scanning for increased body temperature) are to be implemented by schools and kindergartens, including private education institutions, especially as some parents' groups and organisations have been strongly opposing the implementation of such measures.[384] There has also been a discussion on whether these institutions are allowed to share personal information with public authorities of children and their family members who have been ordered to self-isolate.

There was some discussion on whether public authorities could prohibit gatherings inside religious objects, including churches and mosques, as private facilities. In statements by some religious leaders, this was put into the context of restricting the right to freedom of religion of belief.[385]

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380 Rik Arnoudt, 'Mondmaskerplicht in Winkels: "We Rekenen Op Gezond Verstand van de Mensen", Zegt Premier Wilmès' VRT NWS (10 July 2020) <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2020/07/10/mondmaskerplicht-in-winkels-we-rekenen-op-gezond-verstand-van/>.

381 Ibid.

382 Hilde De Windt, 'Knokke-Heist Dreigt de NMBS in Gebreke Te Stellen Voor Export van Covid-19 Naar de Kust: "Te Weinig Controle"' VRT NWS (29 June 2020) <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2020/06/29/knokke-heist-dreigt-de-nmbs-in-gebreke-te-stellen-voor-export/>.

383 Ibid.

384 https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/vise-od-hiljadu-roditelja-na-protestima-u-mostaru-ako-mogu-svadbe-mogu-i-skole/200914133

https://www.bljesak.info/sci-tech/obrazovanje/roditelji-spremaju-odvjetnike-i-veliki-prosvjed/326183

385 http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/kako-biskup-peric-ignorira-korona-virus

https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/biskup-peric-nalozio-odrzavanje-misa-s-vjernicima-u-svim-crkvama-u-hercegovini-20200419, accessed on 9 October 2020.

Croatia

Most of the measures have been recommendations. The drivers of public buses are not entitled to enforce them by force.[386]

Cyprus

8. There is not a specific policy about this issue, however the Office of the Commissioner for Personal Data Protection of the Republic of Cyprus has announced specific guidelines regarding the adoption of several measures by private institutions in order to combat the spread of Covid in accordance to those guidelines adopted by the EPDB (European Protection Data Board).[387]

Denmark

The Danish Working Environment Authority, in collaboration with the Danish Agency for Patient Safety have reached common agreements on the guidelines for work environments.[388] Most private offices have created their own set of covid-guidelines.[389]

Estonia

There has been widespread discussion about how nightclubs and bars attempt to circumvent the prohibition of selling alcohol from the midnight. There is also discussion of whether transportation companies' employees have the responsibility to enforce mask-wearing obligations. Tallinn city government has the view that the responsibility of such enforcement does not rely upon private actors. The public discussion around mask-wearing has an aspect of legality (which is overshadowed by the medical aspect – that is whether the mask-wearing results in better protection) – in the other words, whether there exists sufficient legal basis for the government to impose mask-wearing obligation, whether the legislature should have passed specific regulation allowing the government to impose such regulation, or whether discretion to impose such requirement can be directly derived from the national constitution.

Finland

No. Only recommendations

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386 https://www.zadarskilist.hr/clanci/08092020/maskice-i-javni-prijevoz-vozaci-autobusa-nemaju-ovlasti-za-represivne-mjere.

387 http://www.dataprotection.gov.cy/dataprotection/dataprotection.nsf/All/DBE1A79848332846C22585BB0039B561?OpenDocument, http://www.dataprotection.gov.cy/dataprotection/dataprotection.nsf/All/579C442B15B36E0AC2258553002C744F

388 https://at.dk/coronasider/forebyg-coronasmitte-i-din-branche/coronasmitte-kontor/

389 https://at.dk/coronasider/coronacases/alle-mand-paa-daek-og-saa-alligevel-ikke/

Germany

Apart from the enforcement discussion regarding the railway company mentioned in the question,[390] there has been no comparable discourse. The railway company has, as of now, not given in to demands to establish a private-law contractual fine against travelers not wearing masks. Employees are asked only to call the police at the next stop, if the person in question "repeatedly refuses" to put the mask on.[391]

Israel

There was a similar discussion in Israel on whether the railway company can enforce the mask-wearing obligation. Although the railway company has provided it's own stuff that is in charge to inform the passengers regarding social distance and mask-wearing obligations, the stuff does not have an enforcement authority. Businesses (such as stores) were required to enforce laws within the store such as mask wearing, max. number of people and keeping distances. The Stores were fined and potentially closed if found that they allowed customers to break the rules.

Italy

Yes, there is a lively scholarly and policy-makers' debate on this issue.

Many concerns have been raised as regards the adoption of a contact exposure app called "immuni" for the involvement of a private company in the software deployment. The fact that the download is voluntary by the user has been clarified by the Italian Data Protection Authority only with the decree of 17 October, deputies of healthcare agencies and departments have been forced to use the data of exposure notification which were collected by the application. Before there were many cases in which they were simply ignored.[392] Another relevant issue was the adoption of company-owned applications to control the health condition of employees. The Data Protection Authority has issued a statement in order to safeguard fundamental rights and freedoms of workers.[393]

Latvia

The people who disagree with the duty to wear masks also debate on the rights of the guards to prohibit them from entering the premises. [394] At the same time also the government put the responsibility for the

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390 https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/gesellschaft/coronavirus-maskenpflicht-und-quarantaene-wer-kontrolliert-die-einhaltung-der-regeln-a-b3e18bd9-7935-4d95-90b8-ead762e75fcb

391 https://www.bahn.de/p/view/home/info/corona_startseite_bahnde.shtml

392 https://www.garanteprivacy.it/temi/coronavirus
Decreto della Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 13 ottobre 2020, art. 3 comma 1 lett. «a-bis) al fine di rendere più' efficace il contact tracing attraverso l'utilizzo dell'App Immuni, e' fatto obbligo all'operatore sanitario del Dipartimento di prevenzione della azienda sanitaria locale, accedendo al sistema centrale di Immuni, di caricare il codice chiave in presenza di un caso di positività'». Translation: "in order to make more effective the contact tracing through the app Immuny it is established the obligation for the healthcare officer of the Department of Prevention of the local authority, accessing the central system of Immuni, to upload the key-code in case of positivity".

393 https://www.garanteprivacy.it/web/guest/home/docweb/-/docweb-display/docweb/9343635

394 https://mainampasauli.news/mk-noteikumi-par-obligatu-masku-vilksanu-ir-pretruna-augstakstavosam-tiesibu-aktam/ [Comments ; as on 19.10.2020. ; the article]

compliance with the epidemiological safety measures introduced for Covid-19, i.e., the use of face masks by the visitors, on the shops and businesses, but did not formulate how such responsibility manifests itself.

What concerns the use of masks in shops and other private institutions, it must be noted that not all places actively prohibit entering people without masks.[395] At the same time there has been a case where a security guard allegedly sprayed tear gas in the face of the man who refused to comply with the duty to wear the mask and after a demand to do so acted violently.[396] This case has been widely discussed in the social media and the people once again have divided into two groups.Similarly, also the duty to wear masks in public transport and other places has been doubted as being in violation of Oviedo convention or being illegal due to other grounds. At least 15 thousand people have shared Facebook videos and photos stating that the duty to wear masks in public transport is illegal.[397] Other arguments[398] are that the demand to leave the vehicle breaches the right to freedom (Article 94 of the Constitution) and that the people have the rights to use the ticket they have paid for.[399]

The Cabinet of Ministers has explained that, if the passenger refuses to wear a face mask, the driver or controller has the right to refuse to board or to ask to leave the vehicle.[400] Also, police will be involved in those controls.[401] That is directly stated in the Cabinet of Ministers Regulation No. 599 "Procedures for Provision and Use of Public Transport Services." However, it must be noted that, for example, "Rīgas Satiksme" is a municipally-owned public transportation and infrastructure company in Riga; similarly, also the only passenger-carrying railway company "Pasažieru Vilciens" is an independent state-owned company. Thus, one cannot speak of absolutely private actors who will enforce these regulations.

Lithuania

Not to our knowledge. However, the question of cooperation between the central and municipal authorities gave rise to some debate. Creation of an effective mechanism of cooperation with municipalities was included into the Plan of Implementation of the Covid-19 Management Strategy adopted by the Government on 10/06/2020.[402]

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396 https://jauns.lv/raksts/zinas/409850-daugavpili-veikala-depo-apsargs-sejas-maskas-nenesatajam-seja-iepus-asaru-gazi

397 https://rebaltica.lv/2020/10/prasiba-nesat-masku-sabiedriskaja-transporta-nav-pretlikumiga/

398 https://lvportals.lv/skaidrojumi/320865-sabiedriska-transporta-kontroliera-tiesibas-izsedinat-pasazieri-bez-sejas-maskas-2020

399https://www.facebook.com/brivibasplatforma/posts/127249962466356?__cft__[0]=AZWl4qoLSAAuJyIPYvKqz5hUTra6iqkwBVfyZoWr1ZQaxEMF0QfxouliXNro-7bXFYc7dYMEEDI9igLHG6LS2xXUzHLHS0r30d_om7eIxFyfnMmkJK4qpUmo-5vv9GRm_MHGIBVlXs_NNyrh4CJat4-cWd9kmjAR35Hyu9xWd4KVoh-qAwjZeKjWC7y7fGMd8VUzS9XKCuGHfYbbZITs7Sz2aitXSBWloToT7C776V1Q3d1bbnk0srUojx2n5YbGcnLIbmC3CiD4gLq19SWWRnjs&__tn__=%2CO%2CP-y-R [20.10.2020.]

400 https://www.vm.gov.lv/lv/covid19/jautajumiatbildes_par_sejas_maskam/

401 https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/riga-kontrolieri-un-policija-pastiprinati-kontroles-masku-lietosanu-transporta.a376932/

402 (https://koronastop.lrv.lt/uploads/documents/files/Covid-19%20valdymo%20strategijos%20planas.pdf , see, in particular, 1.5).

Moldova

During the state of emergency periods, the civil society and the media institutions managed a series of actions[403]: i) reversing the decisions of the governmental bodies to introduce journalistic self-censorship; ii) advocating for the adopting of the new NGO law; iii) speaking out against intimidation of the constitutional judges; iv) holding accountable the PM Ion Chicu, the President Igor Dodon and other officials for controversial attitudes of blaming the medical staff, tolerating breaching of the rules by church clergy or of misinforming about external aid.

The central authorities have shown a disproportional approach concerning the fair assessment of the external aid. Thus, the most advertised assistance has been the Russian one, even if it consisted of tests and air transportation of medical goods acquired from China. Regardless that the Chinese support included procured goods, it benefited from overwhelming positive remarks from the Moldovan top officials. By contrast, even though the government commended the 3,5 million EUR worth humanitarian aid from Romania, the ceremony and other technical procedures of the receiving were not smooth. In general, the authorities have emphasized the received assistance from countries with friendlier regimes – Hungary, Turkey, China or Russia. Others were communicated less intensely or shorter in time. The aid from the EU has been among the least promoted one. The Moldovan side claimed that the EU promised financial aid (approx. 190 million EUR of grants and macro-financial assistance) but it has not yet materialized. The particularities of the EU bureaucracy did not permit a quick disbursement of its aid, which underlined the difference between the committed aid of the EU and the actually disbursed one. This has clearly required better communication of the EU to cancel both the misinterpretations and the too high expectations[404].

According to a report by Asociația Promo-LEX, National Endowment for Democracy: "As a result of the policy of repression in the Transnistrian separatist region within the Republic of Moldova *(author's note: please see below the Question 11, (B) Key challenge)*, in the context of the decisions taken by the Tiraspol administration, the first incidents occurred. On April 7, 2020, the Interior Ministry announced that a person from the town of Grigoriopol risks up to 5 years in prison for allegedly calling for aggression. From the published press release, it is observed that this person would have forwarded a message via messenger, which s/he would have received in turn. The message advised people not to open the doors to the Transnistrian militia (a.n. police) and not to agree to a hypothetical vaccination against COVID-19. In the absence of transparency, such a case can be considered at the limit of freedom of expression. Furthermore, the criminal punishment of 5 years of deprivation of liberty for such a message seems to be an unjustified measure. In addition, this case reflects an obvious interference with the protection of personal data, taking into account the verification and supervision of messenger chats, which are a private means of communication.

At the end of April 2020, two people were detained for allegedly criticizing the latest actions of the Tiraspol regime during the pandemic, but also the economic and social situation in the region, in one of the groups on the Viber application. In connection with these actions, the inhabitants of the Transnistrian region became active online and addressed dozens of requests to the constitutional authorities, NGOs, but also to

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403 Michael Emerson, Tamara Kovziridze, Denis Cenusa, Artem Remizov, Veronika Movchan, Shahla Ismayil, Benyamin Poghosyan, Andrei Yahorau. EAP Covid-19 Bulletin No 8: Political impacts of Covid-19, p. 13-14. https://3dcftas.eu/publications/eap-covid-19-bulletin-no-8-political-impacts-of-covid-19

404 idem

the media in the Republic of Moldova. According to some sources, one person was released two days after his detention, and the other person was given the measure of pre-trial detention."[405] (author's own translation from Romanian)

Norway

There has been a debate whether the state-owned public transportation companies Ruter (bus and tram operator in Oslo) and Vy (railway company) can enforce regulations regarding mandatory use of face masks on public transportation.[406] On Vy's and Ruter's electronic information boards and posters inside metros and buses, they encouraged everyone to use face masks on public transportation, even before it was made mandatory on the municipal level.[407] A part of the debate is how the injunction will be enforced.

With new recommendations regarding face masks issued in the beginning of November, the question was also raised how shop attendants should deal with customers who refuse to comply with the regulations.[408] The matter became particularly complicated by the unclear phrasing of the regulation, which originally made face masks mandatory in public in all situations where one meter distance to others could not be maintained, such as in shopping centres. The question then arose how to deal with customers who claimed they *could* maintain proper distance and therefore refused to wear a mask. Also, restaurant staff in Oslo have pointed out that they are not police and should not be put in a position where they have to be law enforcers.[409] The issue has been particularly debated in Oslo due to the more restrictive measures in force there.

Portugal (a)

The General-Direction of Health issued guidelines procedures for prevention, control and surveillance of Covid-19 in companies. The Covid-19 pandemic is considered a matter of health safety for workers and therefore employers have to implement such procedures. The Health Authority is held responsible only for intervening in situations of serious risk to Public Health, monitoring the health of citizens and the health level of services and establishments and determining, when necessary, corrective measures, including the interruption or suspension of activities or services and the closure of establishments.[410] A Portuguese court ordered release of quarantined person in an Azores hotel.[411] Further reference to the judgement from the

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405 Asociația Promo-LEX, National Endowment for Democracy. (author's own translation from Romanian) "Raport Situația respectării drepturilor omului în regiunea Transnistreană pe timp de pandemie Covid-19, 12 martie - 1 iunie 2020 / Report on the human rights situation in the Transnistrian region during the Covid pandemic-19, 12 March - 1 June 2020" p. 15-16. https://promolex.md/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Raport_Regiunea-transnistreana_COVID-19.pdf

406 https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/Kyv5J7/professor-slik-kan-oslo-kommune-selv-haandheve-paabud-om-munnbind; https://nab.no/oslo-politiet-vi-kommer-ikke-til-a-bruke-ressurser-na-pa-a-folge-opp-munnbind-pabud/19.21988.

407 https://www.dagsavisen.no/oslo/ruter-om-munnbind-i-oslo-vil-folge-de-nasjonale-myndighetenes-rad-1.1755825; https://www.nrk.no/osloogviken/munnbind-pabudet-i-oslo_-_-ikke-et-sekund-for-tidlig-1.15179277;

408 https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/vAAlm5/hvor-maa-jeg-bruke-munnbind-hva-gjelder-for-barnekor-og-fritidsklubber

409 https://www.aftenposten.no/osloby/i/JJJEWX/nye-smittetiltak-for-serveringsbransjen-det-er-tull-og-toeys-at-vi-s

410 https://www.dgs.pt/directrizes-da-dgs/orientacoes-e-circulares-informativas/orientacao-n-0062020-de-26022020-pdf.aspx

411 https://portal.oa.pt/comunicacao/imprensa/2020/05/17/covid-19-tribunal-ordena-libertacao-de-pessoa-em-quarentena-num-hotel-dos-acores/.

Portuguese Constitutional Court *Acórdão n.º 424/2020, 31/07*[412], kindly provided by our colleague Paula Veiga. Declaring unconstitutional the provisions of the Azorean regional regulation upon which passengers arriving at the Region had to stay in compulsory quarantine. It does not concern directly disinformation but nonetheless the rational is excessive restriction of basic rights.

Portugal (b)

Yes, there was a strong partnership relationship with the Public Security Police. Multidisciplinary intervention teams were also created from nearby communities most affected by Covid-19. There was good coordination between the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Infrastructure.[413]

Serbia

There has been no discussion regarding the enforcement of general rules related to the Covid-19 by private actors in Serbia. Despite the paramount importance of protecting human health, life, and safety during the Covid-19 pandemic, private actors have no authority to enforce the norms concerning the Covid-19 pandemic. The Ministry of Labor of the Republic of Serbia adopted a set of rules for employers concerning the Covid-19 epidemic. The Rulebook on preventive measures for safe and healthy work to prevent the occurrence and spread of an epidemic of infectious diseases applies to all workplaces where the job is performed, except for the field jobs and working from home.[414] However, the Rulebook does not provide enforcement of rules by private actors.

South Africa

There has not been much of a discussion as those private actors who have sought to enforce the public rules have mostly taken action to do so and have not been strongly opposed. Many retailers are requesting phone numbers and the use of hand sanitizers and mask wearing before allowing entry. In March 2020, the government introduced a limit of 100 people allowed in stores at the same time. Since this coincided with the introduction of lockdown and a rush on retailers, this policy required enforcement and many retailers did so themselves. Private individuals have been instrumental in fighting misinformation on social media, as noted above.[415]

Spain

Spain, as a country where the tertiary sector has a fundamental weight in the economy, has had different controversies regarding the application of health regulations by entrepreneurs and private agents. Probably the most controversial business sector is the nightlife one, which due to diverse regional and state legislation has had great restrictions in view of the difficulty of its control. The controversy has become so great that

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412 https://www.tribunalconstitucional.pt/tc/acordaos/20200424.html

413 https://eportugal.gov.pt.

414 The Rulebook is published in "Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia", no. 94/2020.

415 https://www.cabc.org.za/reports/2020-04-09-mis-dis-information-careza-6th-april-2020/.

in cities where health measures are more invasive, such as Granada whose University's rectorate has called for institutional hardening of nightlife measures, given the risk of contagion among the young population. [416] In a way the press emphasizes the fact that nightlife is difficult to control in itself. [417]

On the other hand, the National Federation of Entertainment and Show Businesses, representative of the sector's entrepreneurs, has criticized the hardening of the measures and rejected accusations to their behaviour, as they consider that actions taken are disproportionate. The sector would already have mechanisms to comply with the prevention of contagion.[418] This is perhaps the most emblematic debate, accentuated by the generation gap. But others can be pointed out, such as the lack of control of hotels during the summer season with respect to international tourist traffic in cities in southern Spain.

416 https://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20201013/484037411690/universidad-fiesta-udg-botellon-cierre-universidad.html

417 https://www.laverdad.es/murcia/cartagena/ocio-nocturno-llena-20201012002955-ntvo.html

418 https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20200923/ocio-nocturno-se-encierra-defensa-sector-injustamente-castigado-pandemia/2042857.shtml

Question 9: Have online platforms been used to disseminate governmental or municipal measures including restrictions and/or suggestions as a response to the spread of the epidemic?

Albania

Yes, they have been the main distributors of information following the TV channels. Facebook and WhatsApp have been widely used in this regard. Firstly, the most common online platforms used during the pandemic are official websites of the Council of Ministers, Ministry of Health and Social Protection, Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports. Also, for each of these institutions there are official Facebook pages, through which announcements are published.

Orders and instructions on measures taken in the pandemic are set out on the official website of the ministries. On the official page of the Council of Ministers, we can find all the news and measures taken for the pandemic situation.

Argentina

Yes, nearly all the three states levels (national, provincial and municipal) created specific contents on their portals containing specific information on these topics. Also at a national level the "CuidAr" app was created and also has their own all the provinces (for example "Covi-19- Provincia de Santa Fe").

Belgium

Although new measures were published on government websites and often explained during press conferences, they were not always understandable for the average Belgian citizen. In that context, some members of parliament used online platforms to disseminate more accessible overviews of the governmental restrictions.[419] As mentioned above (see *supra* no. 3), the Belgian authorities have collaborated with online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to promote government information concerning the pandemic.[420]

The Flemish government, on the initiative of the Minister for Media, Benjamin Dalle (CD&V), used, among others, social media to disseminate a number of campaigns aimed at containing the coronavirus.[421] In

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419 Brecht Warnez, "Corona update", Facebook (16 October 2020),
https://www.facebook.com/warnez.brecht/photos/a.1000340226738536/3045638632208675/.

420 Tim Verheyden, 'Facebook, Google, Twitter En Co Schouder Aan Schouder in Strijd Tegen Valse Informatie over Coronavirus' VRT NWS (18 February 2020) <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2020/02/18/desinformatiecoronavirus/>.

421 Michaël Torfs, '#IKREDLEVENS Is Nieuwe Campagne van Vlaamse Overheid: "Doe de Check-Check-Check' VRT NWS (28 March 2020) <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2020/03/26/corona-campagne-vlaamse-overheid/>; Wim Winckelmans, 'Dalle Schakelt Influencers in Om Jongeren Te Bereiken' De Standaard (20 July 2020) <https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20200719_97523518>; Bert Provoost, 'Minister Dalle Schakelt Influencers in Om Belang Contactopsporing Te Benadrukken' Gazet van Antwerpen (30 July 2020) <https://www.gva.be/cnt/dmf20200730_96241877>; Michaël Torfs, '#IKREDLEVENS Is Nieuwe Campagne van Vlaamse Overheid: "Doe de Check-Check-Check' VRT NWS (28 March 2020) <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2020/03/26/corona-campagne-vlaamse-overheid/>; Vlaamse Overheid, "#VoorElkaar", Facebook (16 July 2020), <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3303179353036457>.

particular, it paid for advertisements, launched hashtags and, with a view to reach young people, relied on influencers to spread the word.[422] The Flemish public broadcaster, VRT, also has published accessible Frequently-Asked-Questions lists on its website,[423] and uses Instagram to communicate news – including news about the pandemic – to young people and children via the accounts @nws.nws.nws and @karrewietketnet.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Yes, media outlets disseminated the information about governmental measures through online platforms, in particular orders and recommendations issued by crisis headquarters at all levels. In addition, a large number of governmental bodies, local self-governance units, and public institutions created new profiles on social media platforms, or started using their existing profiles more actively to disseminate new decisions. This was mostly done through Facebook, and some municipalities and their civil protection services disseminated information through already existing applications or created new ones for the purpose of informing the citizens about the Covid-19 related measures.[424]

Croatia

The Government of Croatia has launched an official website for timely and accurate information on coronavirus available under the following link: www.koronavirus.hr. The website provides information on coronavirus, adopted government measures and initiatives to tackle the crisis, instructions for citizens as well as warnings about certain cases of misinformation present in the public and on social networks e.g. warning about the inefficiency of home-made hands sanitizers or false "recipes" to cure coronavirus.[425]

Cyprus

At this point, we could give a special emphasis on the dissemination of the national laws and rules concerning the pandemic, by the online platforms of the universities, private and public. Moreover, all the health protocols adopted by the educational institutions are in line with the national measures and rules. Finally, we could mention the intensive use of Facebook and other social media through which the government intends to raise public awareness about the expansion of the pandemic (https://www.facebook.com/PIOCy/. (press and information office of the Republic of Cyprus).

Denmark

Yes, the government use social media actively to publish new guidelines and clarify false rumors. The Twitter account of the danish healthcare secretary can be consulted at https://twitter.com/SSTSundhed.

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422 Ibid.

423 https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2020/03/13/coronavirus-antwoord-op-uw-vragen/.

424 https://www.mostar.ba/vijesti_citanje/mobilna-aplikacija-civilne-zastite-grada-mostar.html

425 https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/croatia-report-covid-19-april-2020_en.pdf

Estonia

The most detailed information regarding Covid-19 measures are published on governmental websites. Summaries of those measures are usually displayed on news platforms and social media (government's, municipalities' and Health Board's own pages and other pages – e.g. newspapers, interest groups). There is no legal or administrative obligation for news platforms to display this information, but as there is great public interest in the matter, this is done daily.

Finland

Finland has worked together with social media influencers and established #faktaakoronasta, which means that social media influencers receive weekly information package. This has done in co-operation with THL (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare) and PingHelsinki[426] The number of influencers were 1800. The Hashtag Twitter and Instagram reached 4 million.

Germany

While new and emergency rules were published on (local, regional, federal) government websites, platforms were used to disseminate more accessible overviews of the governmental restrictions and suggestions by many *Länder* governments through their respective Minister-Presidents. This includes the Minister-Presidents of the four most populous states Armin Laschet (North Rhine-Westphalia),[427] Markus Söder (Bavaria),[428] Winfried Kretschmann (Baden-Wuerttemberg)[429], and Stephan Weil (Lower Saxony)[430]. Next to this adapted use of preexisting channels, the measures globally rolled out by platforms were applied in Germany, too (e.g. free ad space for health organizations, featured context-specific links to official information sources, "information centers" on Covid-19 with collections of official communication on the situation et cetera, see also the answer at 3).

Israel

Yes. The Ministry of Health created an "information dashboard" - a detailed website providing updates, including pushes etc. Other platforms were also used. All news site dedicated space to covid-19 info.

Italy

Yes, Facebook has been used by the Government itself. In many cases the provisions were announced combining traditional mass media announcements and web streaming.

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426 https://pinghelsinki.fi/case-faktaa-koronasta/

427 https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=440454516744332

428 https://www.facebook.com/markus.soder.75/photos/a.704543072952706/3950035121736802/

429 https://www.facebook.com/WinfriedKretschmann/photos/a.236116056427702/2995072450532035/?type=3&source=48

430 https://twitter.com/MpStephanWeil/status/1259526857743106048

Latvia

Yes, social networks have been significant for the dissemination of the official information. For example, the Twitter account of the Centre for Disease Prevention and Control is the place where every day the newest data on the positive tests is published.[431] Therefore, this Twitter account has become the leading and primary source of information. Additionally, Twitter has become a favourite platform for the communication and even active discussions with the representatives of the Government of Latvia, i.e., Minister of Health Ilze Viņķele regarding the Covid-19 measures.[432] Government, ministries and local municipalities have also prepared materials specifically suitable for the social networks (Twitter and Facebook) regarding the measures.[433]

All press conferences which took place during the pandemic were filmed and shown in real-time in the profiles of Health Ministry, State television and other relevant actors. Thus the people could follow them in social media and also comment as the debates unveil.[434]

Latvian state television also uses Instagram to rebuke fake news[435] in its Stories and to share news as Instagram posts.[436]

Lithuania

Yes. The Government and the Ministry of Health publishes information on their websites and Facebook accounts. The dedicated website www.koronastop.lt was created and a chatbot[437] was added to it. Press conferences of the State Commander of National Emergency Operations on the Covid-19 were broadcast live on the national television, radio and online during the quarantine.

According to a survey conducted by "Synopticum", in April 2020, 7 out of 10 respondents said it was important to them that Lithuanian state authorities and leaders actively publish information on social media regarding Covid-19 virus and measures taken regarding it. Only one half of respondents considered that institutions communicated on social media in an effective manner. One third of respondents thought they did it ineffectively. Of the Covid-19 related information published on social media, the respondents were mainly interested in facts on spread of the virus in Lithuanian and curbing the pandemic (61%), decisions of Lithuanian politicians in this situation (59%) and news on academic research on the subject of the virus (58%).[438]

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431 https://twitter.com/SPKCentrs

432 https://twitter.com/Vinkele

433 i.e. https://www.facebook.com/VeselibasMinistrija/photos/801541443997006

434 I.e, https://www.facebook.com/VeselibasMinistrija/posts/804797323671418

435. https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/zinas-vieglaja-valoda/instagram-stasts-vai-covid-19-del-bus-piespiedu-vakcinacija-un-cilvekus-cipos.a356920/

436 https://www.instagram.com/p/CEb8C0wJL16/

437 Called ViLTė, see https://koronastop.lrv.lt/en/news/vilte-is-an-automated-conversation-robot-providing-official-covid-19-related-information

438 Karantino metu lietuviai socialiniuose tinkluose naršo dažniau: didžiausias dėmesys – Covid-19 naujienoms, 30/04/2020, https://www.delfi.lt/m360/naujausi-straipsniai/karantino-metu-lietuviai-socialiniuose-tinkluose-narso-dazniau-didziausias-demesys-covid-19-naujienoms.d?id=84173917

Moldova

In Moldova, the pandemic response and its coverage in the media have been highly politicized. The general political competition in the country had its negative effect and led to an increased level of misinformation and manipulation with information. Russian and Chinese disinformation campaigns and media influence have been noticed.[439]

"Moldova is the only country in the EU's neighbourhood that applied a two-months state of emergency (18 March-15 May) rather than worldwide spread one-month period, followed by various extensions. Consequently, legal restrictions on public gatherings larger than three people arose, while the work of civil servants, including the private and non-governmental sectors, have entered "home-office" mode. The public consultations in the decision-making at the level of local public administration faced serious challenges. Even the central institutions did not use or had set up enough online platforms."[440]

The Republic of Moldova did not have a coherent communication strategy concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, while many senior officials in Chisinau continue ignoring minimum precautions. Moreover, public authorities failed to combat disinformation campaigns and fake news launched by representatives of the Moldovan Orthodox Church, and many obscure websites continued to promote conspiracy theories, although at the beginning of the pandemic the Intelligence and Security Service in Chisinau blocked over fifty such websites. However, numerous such websites continue to spread fake news, and no further actions have been taken.[441]

Norway

In the beginning of the pandemic in Norway, most major platforms (such as NRK.no, Aftenposten.no, DN.no VG.no, etc.) had a permanent banner on top of their website with a direct link to official Covid-19 information. This permanently visible link has now been removed from the mentioned pages, but the information pages remain active.[442]

Major news platforms are still central to the government's communication strategy. Regular and ad hoc press conferences are held by government and health officials to communicate information about measures taken to prevent the spreading of the virus and to inform the population about applicable restrictions and recommendations. Participants include all major national and regional news platforms, such as NRK, VG, Dagbladet, Aftenposten, Bergens Tidende (biggest newspaper in Bergen), Fædrelandsvennen (biggest

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439 The Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism". COVID-19 Disinformation Response Index 2020, p. 10. http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/DRI2020WebFIN.pdf

440 Michael Emerson, Tamara Kovziridze, Denis Cenusa, Artem Remizov, Veronika Movchan, Shahla Ismayil, Benyamin Poghosyan, Andrei Yahorau. EAP Covid-19 Bulletin No 8: Political impacts of Covid-19, p. 12. https://3dcftas.eu/publications/eap-covid-19-bulletin-no-8-political-impacts-of-covid-19

441 Alexandru Damian, Vladlena Șubernițchi (Romanian Centre for European Policies). Disinformation and propaganda in the management of the COVID-19 crisis in the Republic of Moldova. July 2020, p. 3: https://www.crpe.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/CRPE_moldova_en-as-of-20.08.pdf

442 NRK: https://www.nrk.no/korona/status/?utm_campaign=korona-minisenter&utm_source=button&utm_medium=status; https://www.nrk.no/nyheter/koronaviruset-1.14855584
VG: https://www.vg.no/spesial/2020/corona/
Aftenposten: https://www.aftenposten.no/emne/Koronaviruset
DN: https://www.dn.no/staticprojects/2020/01/coronaviruset/

newspaper for the area around Kristiansand in southern Norway), etc. Typically, the platform will include links to official information pages in their coverage, but the press releases also includes posters and graphics and other material depicting the latest measures.

Official platforms for information include:

- Regjeringen (regjeringen.no)[443]

- Folkehelseinstituttet (fhi.no)[444]

- Helsedirektoratet (helsedirektoratet.no)[445]

- Helsenorge (helsenorge.no)[446]

Several of the news media also have dedicated pages following the pandemic nationally and internationally, for example Aftenposten.no[447] and NRK.no.[448]

Most public institutions also have a dedicated page for Covid-19 information, i.e.:

- University of Oslo (UiO) and other educational institutions[449]

- NAV (the Norwegian authority for social services)[450]

- Vy[451] (national train service)

- Ruter.no[452] (tram and bus service in Oslo)

- Medietilsynet (the Norwegian Media Authority)[453]

Portugal (a)

Yes. The Ministry of Health has created a webpage dedicated to Covid-19 with hyperlinks to released on YouTube.[454] Moreover, the Government strongly recommends the use of the "StayAway Covid" app which is available on App Store and Google Play

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443 https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/Koronasituasjonen/id2692388/

444 https://www.fhi.no/sv/smittsomme-sykdommer/corona/

445 https://www.helsedirektoratet.no/tema/beredskap-og-krisehandtering/koronavirus

446 https://www.helsenorge.no/koronavirus

447 https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/pL54lE/direktestudio-koronaviruset

448 https://www.nrk.no/korona/status/?utm_campaign=korona-minisenter&utm_source=button&utm_medium=status

449 https://www.uio.no/om/hms/korona/, UiA: https://www.uia.no/om-uia/retningslinjer-og-informasjon-om-koronaviruset, UiB: https://www.uib.no/korona, UiT: https://uit.no/korona and many more.

450 https://www.nav.no/person/koronaveiviser/

451 https://www.vy.no/aktuelt/koronavirus

452 https://ruter.no/nyheter/reiserad/

453 https://medietilsynet.no/mediebildet/slik-avslorer-du-falske-nyheter/

454 https://covid19.min-saude.pt/

Portugal (b)

Yes. Each Ministry and Service has created a website called Covid-19. Informative. STAYAWAY Covid Mobile Application was created.[455]

Serbia

The most significant platform is established by the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Serbia and Institute of Public Health of Serbia "Dr. Milan Jovanovic Batut"[456] as well as Chatbot for the Government of the Republic of Serbia - Viber Automatic Covid-19 Chatbot Serbia.[457] In cooperation with Rakuten Viber, the Government of the Republic of Serbia launched an automatic Covid19 chatbot info service on the Viber platform, in order to provide citizens with verified information, important news and answers to questions regarding Covid-19. The info service contains medical info on the virus, real-time data, prevention measures and guidelines, important numbers and government decisions related to the state of emergency and relaxation of measures. Furthermore, via Viber, by using a number 064/88 11 405, citizens can report non-compliance with epidemiological measures, especially in catering facilities and other places where a large number of citizens gather.[458] This Chatbot is also established by the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Serbia.

South Africa

Yes. In particular, the Electronic Communications, Postal and Broadcasting Directions issued under the Disaster Management Act require all websites with a top level .za top level domain name to have a visible link on their home pages to the government coronavirus information website (www.sacoronavirus.co.za). It is difficult to estimate compliance but it appears to be high among large organisations, which also have websites that receive most traffic. Thus, it would appear that the measure has been effective in making the link visible and the information available. Also, in terms of the Amendment of Information and Communications Technology ("ICT") Covid-19 National Disaster Regulations, "[a]ll Electronic Communications Service and Electronic Communications Network Service licensees must zero rate all Covid-19 sites upon approval by the department of health".

Spain

Yes, public institutions rely upon their social accounts to reach out different audiences and disseminate Covid-19 instructions. Institutional messages are channeled through Twitter, Facebook, YouTube or Instagram, to name a few.[459] Moreover, regional authorities are largely involved in such strategy given the

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455 https://stayawaycovid.pt/landing-page/

456 https://covid19.rs/homepage-english/

457 https://chats.viber.com/covid19info

458 https://novaekonomija.rs/vesti-iz-zemlje/i-vajber-uklju%C4%8Den-u-za%C5%A1titu-od-pandemije.

459 https://twitter.com/sanidadgob, https://www.facebook.com/MinSanidad/, https://www.youtube.com/user/ministeriosyps, https://www.instagram.com/sanidadgob/

fact that public health powers are assigned to such entities and thus they are also intensively using social accounts.[460]

Given the challenges caused by the pandemic, social platforms and health authorities also agreed to prioritize certain messages related to measures and recommendations connected to Covid-19[461]. Twitter, for instance, displays a message (i.e. "Know the facts") and a direct to link to the Health Ministry when the word "coronavirus" is searched[462].

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460 For Catalonia, see https://twitter.com/salutcat

461 https://www.efe.com/efe/espana/efefuturo/covid-19-las-redes-sociales-contra-la-desinformacion/50000905-4201813

462 https://twitter.com/search?q=coronavirus&src=typed_query

Question 10: Has the role of platforms in dealing with Covid-19-related discourses/disinformation impacted the way these platforms are considered in your country?

Note: We are not asking you for an empirical study, but rather a qualitative assessment. Perhaps you can provide some examples of articles or research papers dealing with these issues.

Albania

There has been no research conducted so far covering this matter. The Audio-Visual Media Authority, has not published report on how fake news has changed the way these platforms are considered among the population.

Argentina

Not at all. For example several issues were found in the "CuidAr" app.[463]

Belgium

As regards whether the role of platforms in dealing with Covid-19-related discourses/disinformation has impacted the way these platforms are considered in Belgium, some of the findings of a study conducted by the University of Antwerp (Belgium) in collaboration with the University of Zürich (Switzerland) can be mentioned[464]. In particular, it concerns survey results concerning the perceptions of disinformation, media coverage and government policy related to the coronavirus in six Western countries (Belgium (Flanders), Germany, France, Switzerland, United Kingdom and the United States):

In Flanders, almost seven out of ten people (who are active on social media) are worried about these kinds of messages. Just over half of the respondents indicated that they saw or read (very) often false or misleading information. Another 40% find it rather exceptional, and only a few (according to their own words) never come into contact with it (p. 2);

When shown a manipulated social media post regarding Covid-19 with a statement saying that the virus is a possible bioweapon from China, 'only' 16-18% of the Flemish respondents indicated to be willing to engage with it, by means of a like, share or comment (pp. 5-6).

However, it does not appear (for now) that this study, though it has been reported on by the media[465], nor any other available information concerning the presence, on platforms, of Covid-19-related disinformation has impacted public opinion regarding the role of platforms or triggered any political action in that respect.

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463 https://www.infobae.com/tecno/2020/07/02/crecen-los-reclamos-por-las-fallas-en-cuidar-la-aplicacion-que-deben-utilizar-los-trabajadores-esenciales/

464 Sophie Morosoli and others, 'Perceptions of Disinformation, Media Coverage and Government Policy Related to the Coronavirus - Survey Findings from Six Western Countries' (University of Antwerp/University of Zürich 2020) <https://files.designer.hoststar.ch/62/5f/625fb1a1-868d-4ff3-a809-697b654426af.pdf>.

465 Amra Dorjbayar, 'Zeven Op de Tien Vlamingen Zijn Bezorgd over Desinformatie over Het Coronavirus' VRT NWS (7 January 2020), <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2020/06/30/stijging-desinfo-tijdens-coronavirus/>.

There is another study with 1.679 respondents that has found that news consumers in Flanders trust traditional media more than social media in relation to information about the coronavirus, and that they think that fake news about the virus is mostly spread by social media (esp. Facebook).[466]

Bosnia and Herzegovina

There has been some general discussion on the impact of online platforms, especially social media on the Covid-19- related discourse and (dis)information sharing. For example, the most prominent fact-checker sites in the country, as well as the region, have qualified social media platforms as polygons or "playgrounds" for disseminating disinformation about the pandemic.[467] The Special Report about the Dissemination on the Coronavirus published by the European External Action Service (EEAS), notes several issues related to the coverage of the pandemic in the Western Balkans region. False news, misinformation and disinformation concerning Covid-19 were observed in the WB information environment. [468]

However, there has been no discussion at the level of state policy on whether online platform need to be regulated or considered in a different way. The general discussion about BiH needing a new set of media-related laws, including those that would regulate the internet, remains prevalent during the pandemic. More focus is placed on the responsibility of platforms that should, by self-regulation, steer the course of information sharing online.[469] Also, as in other countries, the focus is usually on specific instances of moderation decisions,[470] a small number of them, and a wider or a more systematic reconsideration of the role of platforms is lacking.

Croatia

Facebook has a reputation of allowing "just anything" so not a very trustworthy source of information. The government issued a warning about fake news to the public.[471]

Cyprus

There has not been a wide discussion about this issue.

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466 Artevelde Hogeschool, News in times of corona: How do Flemish people experience the news about the coronavirus and how do they deal with fake corona news? (Artevelde Hogeschool, Ghent)

https://www.arteveldehogeschool.be/sites/default/files/projectfiche/coronanieuwsrapport-fin.pdf, p. 5.

467 https://detektor.ba/2020/04/07/intervju-tijana-cvjeticanin-drustvene-mreze-kao-igraliste-za-sirenje-dezinformacija-o-pandemiji/

468 https://detektor.ba/2020/04/07/intervju-tijana-cvjeticanin-drustvene-mreze-kao-igraliste-za-sirenje-dezinformacija-o-pandemiji/

469 https://detektor.ba/2020/05/25/intervju-enes-osmancevic-mediji-imaju-posebno-vaznu-ulogu-u-nadgledanju-i-izvjestavanju-tokom-pandemije/

470 On the shutdown of a FB Qanon group in BIH https://ba.voanews.com/a/facebook-teorije-zavjere/5613514.html, accessed on 12 October 2020.

471 https://vlada.gov.hr/news/fake-recording-going-round-on-social-media-about-zagreb-being-placed-in-quarantine/28970

Denmark

Not only in relation to Covid-19, but more in general on free speech on online platforms.[472] A new inter-ministerial task force consisting of heads of the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, PET and FE, who will coordinate the response to major misinformation attempts in recognition of threats across areas.[473]

We believe there is generally a growing attention that online platforms are used to spread disinformation, but there are simultaneously struggles to dealing with it, for example without limiting basic human rights.

Estonia

The reputation of the platforms does not appear to have changed during the "Covid-era". It seems more likely that the pre-existing reputation has been re-enforced as the same patterns of bias have exhibited themselves.

Finland

There is ongoing research, but not yet published results

Germany

While their role in dealing with Covid-19 discourses has been debated,[474] on a broad, societal level Covid-19 and the related disinformation has not substantially reframed the ongoing general discussion about the platforms, at least not beyond the threshold of triggering nationwide attention or political action. The fact that planned changes to the NetzDG drafted pre-Covid were not modified in light of the pandemic and its communicative side effects points in that direction, too. While individual moderation decisions by platforms against politicians or other public figures (most notably Donald Trump) are heavily reported on,[475] questions regarding shifting practices or roles of these platforms remain in the background.

Israel

Covid-19 arrived after the Israeli public's trust in online platforms decreased significantly in the last two years.[476]

One interesting Israel-specific impact is the role of online platforms among the Haredi (Jewish ultra orthodox) population. This population avoids the internet (and classic media) for religious reasons. For a variety of reasons including their avoidance of media and internet and also being a poor population, the

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472 https://justitia-int.org/en/new-report-digital-freedom-of-speech-and-social-media/

473 https://www.tjekdet.dk/danmark-faar-ny-kommandocentral-mod-misinformation

474 https://www.dw.com/de/von-der-mammutaufgabe-desinformation-zu-stoppen/a-54846398, https://www.handelsblatt.com/technik/it-internet/twitter-und-facebook-studie-das-sind-deutschlands-groesste-verbreiter-von-verschwoerungstheorien/25842870.html?ticket

475 https://www.zeit.de/news/2020-08/06/corona-falschinformationen-facebook-loescht-trump-video, https://www.stuttgarter-zeitung.de/inhalt.falschinformationen-twitter-und-facebook-loeschen-trump-beitraege-zum-coronavirus.590fe7c6-3b3a-481a-a3dd-1d68bde0843a.html,

476 https://www.idi.org.il/media/13354/public-confidence-in-the-media-and-social-networks-in-israel.pdf

Haredi population was the hardest hit by covid-19 in Israel. As a result, the demand for internet connection and social media among the Jewish orthodox community has raised significantly.

Italy

We don't have examples of that. It seems that the disinformation did not impact the role and position of the most popular platforms.

Latvia

Covid-19 and the related disinformation has not substantially reframed the ongoing general discussion about the platforms, at least not beyond the threshold of triggering nationwide attention or political action. The only debates there have been on the liability for the distribution of fake news; however, such liability would apply mostly to the distributor himself (both as a private person and media), not the platforms.[477] It can be noted, however, that the believers of alternative theories are now feeling like YouTube and Facebook censors[478] them, thus they have made Telegram channels[479] and presumably also chats (which are seen as "safer").

However, the "infodemics" has actualised the discussion on the need to provide clear legal definitions of "disinformation" and the liability for its distribution.[480] Even though during the debate in May it was stated that these news to not resonate widely and are mostly distributed within specific limited circles, thus might not be so dangerous, the State police noted that "there is a need for an effective tool for the social network, internet and television operators to delete false messages, as they do not always do so at the request of the police."[481] As the possible options, there have been considered amendments on The Law on the Press and Other Media, the Law on Electronic Media and the creation of a new framework to include websites that are not subject to the two laws mentioned above. Also, it has been recognised as necessary to assess the inclusion of a new norm in the Criminal Law, which would be aimed at prohibiting deliberate dissemination of false, misleading, distorted information.

Lithuania

Not to our knowledge.

Moldova

I have not found exact data in this regard. Still, some improved perceptions about Facebook could be grasped based on the fact that to provide support and assistance for vulnerable social categories affected

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477 https://lvportals.lv/dienaskartiba/316566-ieslietu-ministrs-iesniedz-izskatisanai-saeima-likumprojektus-viltus-zinu-apkarosanai-2020

478 https://mainampasauli.news/cenzets-socialajos-tiklos/

479 https://t.me/s/mainampasauli?before=118

480 https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/aicina-skaidri-definet-dezinformaciju-un-tas-izplatitajus-ka-ari-grozit-kriminallikumu.a359509/

481 https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/aicina-skaidri-definet-dezinformaciju-un-tas-izplatitajus-ka-ari-grozit-kriminallikumu.a359509/

by the pandemic, special groups[482];[483] were created, for example: "List of the most useful groups on Facebook in Moldova XIX: communities that appeared in the context of COVID-19"; " List of the most useful groups on Facebook in Moldova XX: communities that help each other in the context of COVID-19"; "We support local business in Moldova" et al.

Norway

There do not seem to be any significant changes in the way the main platforms are considered in Norway. However, without being able to show statistics, the digital platforms of relevant governmental authorities (i.e. the health authorities) are likely to have substantially increased their visitors in the last 7,5 months. As such, it has perhaps become a trend to cross-check information with these platforms and ensure that numbers and statistics are gathered from the actual source, and not just through mainstream media channels.

For example, when reading a 'click-bait' title about Covid-19, such as 'covid-deaths on the increase', it seems people have become more likely to refer to FHI (the public health authority) to check the correct numbers and information. This in contrast to before Covid-19, when most people would not have considered checking the health authorities' platforms for correct information on health-related news.

Portugal (a)

Instagram is credited for giving users very interesting options to deal with the Covid-19 pandemics rather than just providing accurate information or fake news.[484]

Portugal (b)

Yes, these platforms have been very popular with all sectors of society and with an impact on citizenship and information for the population.[485]

Serbia

Public discussion on Covid-19-related discourses and disinformation is vivid, particularly on the platforms. However, platforms' role in dealing with Covid-19-related discourses/disinformation has not changed their

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482 List of the most useful groups on Facebook in Moldova XX: communities that help each other in the context of COVID-19 / Lista celor mai utile grupuri pe Facebook-ul din Moldova XX: comunități care se ajută în contextul COVID-19. April 4, 2020. https://diez.md/2020/04/04/lista-celor-mai-utile-grupuri-pe-facebook-ul-din-moldova-xx-comunitati-care-se-ajuta-in-contextul-covid-19/

483 List of the most useful groups on Facebook in Moldova XIX: communities that appeared in the context of COVID-19 / Lista celor mai utile grupuri pe Facebook-ul din Moldova XIX: comunități apărute în contextul COVID-19. https://diez.md/2020/03/18/lista-celor-mai-utile-grupuri-pe-facebook-ul-din-moldova-xix-comunitati-aparute-in-contextul-covid-19/

484 https://www.meiosepublicidade.pt/2020/06/instagram-pandemia-do-covid-19-analise-master-d/

485 Machado, I. & Melo, S. (coord). (2020). (Re)inventing social intervention in the context of Pandemic. Porto: Sociology Institute of the University of Porto. 4 volume of the booklets. Borges, M. (2020). The impact of the VOCID-19 crisis on Harm Reduction intervention. Critical analysis of interventions and social actors| between crisis and opportunity. In, Machado I., & Melo (coord), (Re)inventing social intervention in the context of Pandemic, (15-23). Porto: Institute of Sociology of the University of Porto.

public perception considerably. Studies considering their influence during the pandemic are rare. This is a topic yet to be analyzed.[486]

South Africa

Social media has contained large amounts of misinformation, which is occasionally addressed by other users of the social media. We are not aware that this has led to particular animosity towards, or distrust of, the platforms themselves, rather than the people who have shared the misinformation. There does seem to be an awareness that people should verify information they receive on Covid or the lockdown, but this is not limited to social media. Recent calls for better regulation of WhatsApp suggest a growing realisation that the sharing of unverified information poses a health risk. However, it is noteworthy that the calls focus on the duties of private users of WhatsApp rather than WhatsApp itself or the government.[487]

Spain

We have found some debate about the Spanish case. 68% of Spanish internet users expressed concern about whether Internet-based information is real or not. Having in mind that these data belong to the *Study of the digital situation, internet and social networks. Spain, January 2020,*[488], we can deduce that trust in platforms from which Spanish users extract that information / disinformation is also questioned. According to Casero-Ripollés, the data suggest that more consumption of news about the Coronavirus did not translate into a significant increase in trust towards the media.[489]

However, López Rico[490] *et al.* conclude that respondents have valued the information about the coronavirus provided by the media as truthful, showing a clear pattern of co-occurrence in two groups: the media with a center-left editorial line and those of the center-right.

In the interviews carried out with the responsible for Spanish fact-checking companies, it is mentioned that YouTube was singled out for not carrying out verification efforts at all. The platform started then implementing measures to verify its contents.[491]

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486 The available study is published by FakeNews tragač, "Korona virus Infodemija u Srbiji" , supra note 2.

487 https://www.cabc.org.za/reports/2020-04-09-mis-dis-information-careza-6th-april- 2020/

488 Yi Min Shun Xiz. Social Media, Marketing, Seo, Marca personal from Similarweb data. Retrieved from https://yiminshum.com/social-media-espana-2020/

489 Casero-Ripollés, A. (2020). "Impact of Covid-19 on the media system. Communicative and democratic consequences of news consumption during the outbreak". The information professional, 29 (2).

490 López-Rico, Carmen María; González-Esteban, José Luis; Hernández-Martíinez, Alberto. 'Polarization and trust in the Spanish media during Covid-19. Identification of audience profiles', Revista española de comunicación en salud, [S.l.], p. 77-89, Jul. 2020. Retrieved from: https://e-revistas.uc3m.es/index.php/RECS/article/view/5439/3926

491 Source: interviews with representatives of the verification platforms. Unpublished.

Question 11: Can you provide input for our conclusions summing up your impression of whether platforms in your country have dealt with the issue sensibly or not and what the key challenges are from your perspective.

Albania

Yes, the platforms in the country have dealt relatively well and professionally in the coverage of the virus period and have tried to avoid fake news. It can be assumed that one of the problems related to platforms, could be the lack of experience or lack of staff to deal with and focus on specific cases. Usually fake news in this country are more heightened and become part of the political fight among the main political parties.

In Albania the platforms cited above are widely used mainly among the younger generations. The time spent on them is quite high and consequently, the information reflected there affects the way these group of people also perceives the situation, creating often misunderstandings with regards to measures which need to be taken. In most cases, the Prime Minister has used Facebook to spread the information on the measures taken/introduced as well as the progress of the situation. This has often caused dissatisfaction due to the expectations of the public to receive information only through official channels through visual or print media.

The main challenge that arises is especially related to ensuring the authenticity of information provided through social networks, avoiding offensive or discriminatory comments by the public and raising awareness at the national level about the importance of using online platforms.

Argentina

In my view, although an attempt has been made to treat the information seriously in general, political party interests, for electoral purposes, have played a distorting role of reality. The challenge lies in decontaminating the information of these intentions.

Belgium

Importantly, the online platforms, that is to say Facebook and Twitter, in Belgium are enhancing the reach of trusted sources. In particular, they increase the visibility of official government information, by promoting their official websites, messages and pages.

In addition, they take measures to trace and take down Covid-19-related disinformation. However, it appears from information disseminated by the federal police unit searching for (Covid-19-related) disinformation that online platforms remove only half of the posts which it reported to them as being problematic (237/450, see *supra* no. 5). It seems as though this could be problematic. Accordingly, there might be room for improvement as regards the cooperation and joint action against disinformation between and by online platforms and the Belgian authorities.

As it appears from the study conducted by the University of Antwerp and the University of Zürich concerning the perceptions of disinformation, media coverage and government policy related to the

coronavirus in six Western countries cited above (see *supra* no. 10) that 7 out of 10 active users are worried about Covid-19-related disinformation, it is clear that online platforms can and should still do more.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

I would say that the pandemic has brought a more active engagement in content moderation by the platforms, especially on a global level. Before the pandemic, in a way, it was unimaginable for platforms to exercises this level of content moderation, including flagging of posts as false or inaccurate and banning the profiles of groups or individuals. In a sense, I would say that content moderation relating to Covid-19 disinformation had a sort of a spill-over effect or speeded the decisions of content moderation relating of other topics, such as the recent initiative by Facebook to better regulate hate speech and enhance the accessibility of credible sources about the Holocaust.[492]

In a local context, there is not enough academic discussion and research on the topic, and I have not been able to detect any kind of systemic overview on how platforms have tried to deal with the Covid-19 related disinformation, except for intensifying awareness raising and media literacy campaigns, usually in co-operation with civil society, media outlets, fack checker platforms, and international organisations active in the field of freedom of expression and others such as WHO.

On a more general note, I would say that the perception of the wider public with regards to how platforms have dealt with the issue became more negative as the infodemic reached its peak in the midst of the lockdown. In a sense, the level of trust in information shared on the platforms kept decreasing, which was backed up by a general feeling of information overload and fatigue.

Croatia

In comparison to public media the platforms of social media were often used to disseminate false information. In particular, they provided space for world known Croatian scientists who managed to keep the trust of the majority population.

Cyprus

At European institutional level it is obvious that there have been adopted quite satisfactory measures towards this issue. For example, we can mention the EU Code of conduct on countering illegal hate speech online which has been agreed in May 2016 between European Commission and online platforms, such as Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter and YouTube in order to prevent and counter the spread of illegal hate speech online.[493] We can also mention the Code of Practice on Disinformation which is the first worldwide self-regulatory set of standards to fight disinformation voluntarily signed by platforms, leading social networks, advertisers and advertising industry in October 2018. Signatories are Facebook, Twitter, Mozilla, Google and associations and members of the advertising industry. Microsoft subscribed to the Code of Practice in

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492 https://analiziraj.ba/2020/10/12/facebook-ce-zabraniti-sadrzaj-koji-negira-holokaust/

493 https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combatting-discrimination/racism-and-xenophobia/eu-code-conduct-countering-illegal-hate-speech-online_en

May 2019. TikTok joined the code in June 2020.[494] This Code is part of a number of measures and policies taken from EU in order to tackle disinformation and assure a safe online environment.

Despite the well-structured European policy, we can remark a special lack of organized state policy. For example, the fact that there is not a special law on social media or in the field of online disinformation raise great interest. Moreover, a large number of Cypriots citizens believe that public authorities should adopt special measures in order to help them better identify disinformation, prevent those who spread disinformation from abusing social media platform services and regulate social media platforms to reduce the distribution of fake news (special eurobarometer 503) . From that point of view, the scientific observation of the aforementioned issues is quite interesting and provocative and will lead to several conclusions, such as the quality of the rights of online users, their online consciousness and the right balance between national and private policies regarding the fighting against the pandemic of Covid.

Denmark

There is already an issue of dealing with freedom of expression on online platforms, and Covid-19 has only increased this pressure. Speech can hurt, and it can have consequences. I fear - and this is my personal opinion - that we are already seeing basic freedom rights being suspended on online platforms, and disinformation is now a gateway for more content moderation. There is an inherent problem in our conception of verifiable information. What is true and what should be followed changes rapidly, especially in the pandemic. This means that verifiable sources such as governmental communications might contradict. To give an example: the Danish Health Authorities changed their viewpoint on the effect of masks (first they did not see them as useful, and now they enforce the use of masks in all public spaces). Does it mean that a social media post saying that masks are helpful before the public authorities the authorities defined it obligatory, is considered disinformation? What about the post saying masks are not helpful after the public authorities said it is? There seems to be a temporal aspect that needs to be considered in the definition of what is disinformation.

Estonia

The platforms have enabled public discussion about the issue and have not suppressed contradictory or conflicting views. The approach of the major platforms does not appear different from approaches towards other issues which affect the well-being on the entire nation. The key challenge is perhaps to explain to the population the statistical figures – what does exactly mean the coefficient of infections per 100 000 etc. There is one feature which characterizes all platforms in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic: the tone of humor is entirely missing from any news dissemination, public discussions or editorials. It is perhaps leading to a perspective of double vulnerability: epistemic vulnerability of anyone using the internet, which is magnified by vulnerability of everyone in front of the new pandemic.

Finland

Finland has strong confidence on authorities, media and medical science. For example vaccine coverage is very high in Finland. One of the examples is the wide scale adoption of the Koronavilkku app (showing

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494 https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/tackling-online-disinformation

warning of covid19 contagion), over 4 million have uploaded the app to their phone. Most of the disinformation is coming from abroad and traditional measures have been sufficient.

Germany

It seems platforms have done well in contextualizing disinformation and enhancing the reach of trusted sources. Regarding content moderation the dimensions and impacts of the changes in rules and enforcement methods are still unclear. In that regard, more transparency and research is necessary. Overall, it seems platforms escape a new wave of demands to become "arbiters of truth" in Germany due to the relative consensus on scientific findings and methods among the democratic parties. For this reason, Covid-19 related platform actions that derive their legitimacy from this consensus are – by and large – uncontroversial, if not welcome.

Israel

No input here at this time. There does not seem to be any serious effort by the platforms.

Italy

Our impression is that Facebook and Twitter made an effort to show that they are taking the problem seriously by removing contents on ground of its inaccuracy. We don't have neither the impression nor information to say that this was a country-specific strategy, but a more general approach which relies also to external fact-checking platforms. In Italy the Government insists more on the awareness of individual citizens than on what platforms can do. We think that those are not mutually exclusive strategies: the key challenge is to combat disinformation while also improving individuals' awareness and knowledge of the social media world.

Latvia

The main challenge, of course, is balancing between the restrictions of false news and the freedom of expression. It can be seen that Facebook has become an accessible playground for various fake-news distributors, also regarding the need to fight against masks and vaccines. Such Facebook functions as Groups are beneficial for these purposes. However, in our opinion, Facebook has acted sensibly. There is constant fact-checking and the people impacted by that also point to that; however, this does not take place in such amounts that they would search for a more concealed platform. Additionally, useful for both sides is the fact that the fact-checkers cannot and do not delete any posts, just "mark" them as false.[495] Especially beneficial is the rebuking of fake news in specific articles on the webpages of fact-checkers, thus allowing the people to understand why the information has been marked and what do the other sources say.

The media is continuously publishing articles on the cases when YouTube and other actors have deleted the videos and other media containing fake news.[496] At the same time, more transparency and clarity is

495 https://www.facebook.com/inga.springe.3/posts/4810218492329585

496 https://www.apollo.lv/6969046/socialie-tikli-bloke-lielu-popularitati-ieguvuso-video-par-covid-19-kas-satur-maldinosu-informaciju, https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/arzemes/youtube-dzesti-2500-kinas-dezinformacijas-kanali.a369627/ etc

needed on how the articles get marked as fake, when and how they get sent to the fact-checkers, what funds they receive from Facebook etc. Additionally, more clarity is needed on how other platforms – Telegram, WhatsApp, YouTube – are currently fighting against fake news and what is their strategy regarding the deletion of posts. Additionally, in our perspective, even more emphasis should be put on the official news regarding the pandemic, i.e., Facebook should be even more proactive in their distribution.

Lithuania

Sufficient information was provided on official websites of the Government institutions. The positive role of mainstream news providers in identifying fake news related to Covid-19 was noticeable. Facebook users in Lithuania received some information on where to turn to for official information regarding Covid-19.

Moldova

Key challenge (A):

"As for the large-scale data hacks, Russia has a twelve-year history of cyberattacks against the EU's associated states. In 2008 Georgia faced a large-scale cyberattack coinciding with Russia's military intervention. Since then cyberattacks continue against government websites, media, private sector, energy companies and election commissions in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine."[497]

Key challenge (B):

Transnistrian separatist region within the Republic of Moldova: violations of freedom of expression and protection of personal data. As the following source, Asociația Promo-LEX, National Endowment for Democracy, suggests:

"In parallel with the adoption of comprehensive declarations or guidelines by international human rights organizations, the administration of the Transnistrian region is adopting its own acts. On March 17, 2020, the alleged security ministry in Tiraspol issued a statement stating that in the Transnistrian region there were cases of using messenger chats and social media groups that shared information that did not correspond to the truth. In this regard, the inhabitants of the region were advised to be careful about what information they distribute, and if in doubt, that information can be verified with the "central authorities". It should be noted that this communiqué comes with the establishment of the state of emergency and the application of restrictive measures that have been the subject of discussions in the public space in the region. Meanwhile, the alleged interior ministry in Tiraspol says that people who break the quarantine rules are identified with the help of surveillance cameras and the facial recognition system.

In addition, on April 21, 2020, the Tiraspol Operational Commission, set up to manage the epidemiological crisis, ordered the verification of all online information (including messenger chats) that describes or

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497 Tinatin Akhvlediani. Which spreads faster in the EU's neighbourhood: Coronavirus or disinformation ? 3 DCFTAs Op-ed No 13/2020, April 2020, p. 3.

https://3dcftas.eu/op-eds/which-spreads-faster-in-the-eu%E2%80%99s-neighbourhood-coronavirus-or-disinformation

mentions the insufficient provision of medical personnel in the Transnistrian region with means of protection.

(…) In the last two years, the administration of the Transnistrian region has adopted a restrictive and sufficiently consistent policy against the opposition, civil society organizations or simply against uncomfortable people. Thus, in the spring of 2018, the control over the associative environment was formalized, and in the spring of 2019, the local Criminal Code was amended in the sense of restricting the freedom of expression. Given this context, the acts issued by the de facto administration in Tiraspol in March and April 2020 only provide continuity to the policy of restricting the space of civil society and freedom of expression in the Transnistrian region. As a result of this situation, but also of other serious cases, on May 4, 2020, the Promo-LEX Association urged the representatives of the 5 + 2 negotiation format to take all possible measures not to admit the violation of freedom of expression in the Transnistrian region. Thus, the "Not Free" rating given by Freedom House to the Transnistrian region is as truthful and well-founded as possible." (author's own translation from Romanian).[498]

Norway

The news- and official platforms in Norway have dealt sensibly with the issue of Covid-19 disinformation. There has been a lot of attention towards disinformation, and most platforms have published articles about the risk of disinformation about the pandemic.[499]

In terms of social media platforms and disinformation about Covid-19, there is little information about how this has been handled. Most information found in Norwegian sources points to information posted on Facebook by people abroad, i.e. the chain letter from the Italian doctor.[500]

Portugal (a)

In Portugal platforms deal with the issue mainly echoing policies adopted in their country of origin. Portuguese is not yet a working language for most fact-checking bots and basically platforms do not follow a Portugal-specific approach, but rather see it as a limited part of the European single market.

The news feed of platforms in Portugal on Covi-19mirrors to a large extent what happens in their country of origin, nowadays focused in the US presidential elections. A first challenge is therefore to have a wider perspective, and in particular a more European focused approach.

Then, it would be important to have a real-time and more effective system of fact-checking on Covid-19 news, probably using colours to inform the public about the accuracy of information (green for OK, yellow for unchecked, red for confirmed "fake-news"). Moreover, it would be important to identifiy clearly

498 Asociația Promo-LEX, National Endowment for Democracy. (author's own translation from Romanian) "Raport Situația respectării drepturilor omului în regiunea Transnistreană pe timp de pandemie Covid-19, 12 martie - 1 iunie 2020 / Report on the human rights situation in the Transnistrian region during the Covid pandemic-19, 12 March - 1 June 2020" p. 15-16. https://promolex.md/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Raport_Regiunea-transnistreana_COVID-19.pdf

499 NRK Beta: https://nrkbeta.no/2020/03/11/slik-spres-falske-nyheter-om-koronaviruset/; Aftenposten has its own tag for 'fake news': https://www.aftenposten.no/tag/falske-nyheter; VG.no: https://www.vg.no/nyheter/utenriks/i/0nllXG/fake-news-om-coronaviruset-florerer

500 https://www.faktisk.no/artikler/RvY/flere-korona-rad-fra-italiensk-lege-i-populaert-kjedebrev-er-helt-feil

whether a text is presented as factual information or merely an opinion or even a fiction, not to mention that sponsored messages should clearly identify their nature as well as the sponsor.

Freedom of expression is to be guaranteed, but so does the right of the public not to be misled or manipulated in a democratic and open society.

Portugal (b)

In the present and in the field of Human Rights, an analysis and interpretation of the impact of digital platforms on people's well-being, their quality of life and how they should act to prevent problems of the mental and psychic health forum is important. Question how human rights are integrated in these Digital Platforms. Realizing what interests they are serving

Serbia

As said before, Serbia has been identified as one of the several countries with the most substantial impact of fake news. The situation has worsened during the pandemic. Much of the Covid-19-related disinformation has come from the platforms listed above, particularly from Facebook. While some criminal investigations for causing panic and fear by fake news dissemination through social media have been initiated, no one has yet been sentenced. The serious problem is that the official Covid-19-related data are disputed by investigative journalists and medical experts not engaged in their collection and processing. Improving the official Covid19-related information system would limit the space for spreading disinformation through platforms.

South Africa

We have not found evidence that the South African social media groups are themselves monitoring their platforms through structural mechanisms such as fact-checkers. Instead, misinformation is tackled through individual complaints from the public, and corrected not by the platform but by third parties who choose to engage with the misinformation. These include private individuals and organisations such as Real411, the Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change (CABC), Africa Check and AFP (itself an organisation based in France). The key challenges that the media platforms need to meet is therefore to ensure that there are sufficient fact-checkers monitoring their news feeds. The government should consider measures to monitor and enforce compliance with its Regulation requiring media sites to remove false information.[501]

Spain

Lots of research must be done in relation with content moderation. Our Law on Information Society Services does not help. There is a need for change in legislation and in this regard the Regulation (EU)

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501 https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-03-23-the-first-gag-is-the-deepest-freedom-of-expression-after-corona-censorship/; https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-04-30-botswana-censorship-is-not-the-cure-for-covid-19/; https://factcheck.afp.com/poster-shared-south-africa-makes-false-claims-about-face-masks; https://www.cabc.org.za/reports/2020-04-09-mis-dis-information-careza-6th-april-2020/; https://www.cabc.org.za/reports/2020-04-09-mis-dis-information-careza-5th-april-2020/; https://www.cabc.org.za/about-us; https://factcheck.afp.com/about-us; https://africacheck.org/reports/live-guide-all-our-coronavirus-fact-checks-in-one-place/

2019/1150 of the European Parliament and the Council of June 20, 2019 about equity and transparency for users of intermediation services is a good initiative.

Since several actors participate in the diffusion of illegal material online, the responsibility of a safe Internet should be shared among all these players. Concrete regulatory improvements may encourage online hosting platforms to do their part in monitoring proactively and diligently, such as affirming a good Samaritan clause.

The self-regulation of platforms has not been enough to get good results.

Question 12: Can you provide input for our recommendations regarding the question of how different stakeholders – a) state authorities, b) companies/platforms, c) civil society – should act in the future to more effectively fight Covid-19-related disinformation.

Albania

State authorities should act in a transparent manner, communicate accurately, and characterized by seriousness and with full responsibility.

Companies/platforms should focus more on checking their stories, news and prevent fake news. That would mean more money used at a time of difficulties. Nonetheless, it needs more attention, willingness from them to fight such a phenomenon, but also a stronger culture of fighting disinformation.

Argentina

Public authorities must adhere as strictly as possible to the recommendations of the world health organization and dispense with electoral struggle in decision-making. In addition, they must develop more efficient and secure applications and less invasive of privacy, since numerous questions have been made to them. For their part, private companies and platforms must concentrate all their efforts to achieve the elimination of clearly false information without affecting freedom of expression and information. They must also continue to provide applications and sites where false news can be dismantled and access to reliable and updated information. Finally, civil society is responsible for monitoring these efforts and coordinating its own with public authorities and private companies to achieve better results in the fight against false information related to the pandemic and to help in the ways possible to people affected by the pandemic.

Belgium

State authorities: Belgian authorities could invest in raising awareness among citizens (through campaigns) about the negative impact and consequences of Covid-19-related disinformation on society (e.g.: that it endangers public health, directly affecting people's lives). Next to that state authorities can, since private actors are the ones running the online platforms where disinformation campaigns are being launched and spread, provide incentives to private actors so they would prioritize the truth over profit margins, a logical prerequisite for effectively participating in anti-disinformation actions. The role of the public service broadcasters in promoting accurate information and the role of other traditional media (newspapers, broadcasters) is also of importance.

Companies/platforms: Online platforms should permanently keep on searching and removing fake news, including through extensive content moderation workforces. Additionally, they should enhance cooperation and joint action against disinformation between and by them and the Belgian authorities. Providing feedback about whether or not and why certain posts are removed and others not is also important.

Civil society: Civil society organization could organize media literacy workshops, develop fact checking networks, promote the use of legacy media, report disinformation, …

Bosnia and Herzegovina

a) State authorities should acknowledge companies/platforms and civil society as partners in their efforts to correctly balance between the need to protect the health and freedom of expression of citizens, in connection to fighting disinformation and that could have real life and harmful implications. State authorities should also make sure to communicate all information related to the pandemic in a transparent, accurate, timely and responsible manner, including through platforms.

b) With regards to relation with state authorities, companies and platforms should be more transparent about their content management protocols, and co-operate more openly with countries, and possibly consider co-regulation on a country-by-country basis (possibly by appointing a Focal Point for each country). Also, with regards to civil society, they should engage more in programs to empower users to be able to better distinguish between information that comes from credible sources and disinformation shared by unverified sources.

c) Civil society organizations and platforms that operate as fact checkers should remain performing their role as watchdogs, and advocate more actively towards state authorities for adoption of a more up-to-date legal framework that would regulate this field.

Croatia

If the information by the authorities is provided timely and accurately with verifiable sources it narrows the play field for fake news.

Cyprus

a) State authorities should adopt specific measures towards the regulation of social media. In general, there is a lack of well-structured legislation on internet issues.

b) Companies and platforms should play a decisive role in the meaning that they have to support fact-checking services, promote self-regulation (such as codes of conduct) and develop satisfactory mechanisms in order to identify fake news and prevent those who spread disinformation.

c) Civil society should be more sensitive about the rights and the obligations on the internet. Living on a digital era presumes that online users are well educated and use internet services for the common good. it is obvious that educational seminars and the participation of both public and private authorities are of primary value.

Denmark

Just a personal reflection: we should be aware that when controlling disinformation, we risk harming fundamental rights as freedom of expression. And where the virus hopefully is only a period of time (even several years) the harm done to fundamental rights, rights who people fought for decades, can have far greater consequences.

Estonia

a) state authorities should keep on publishing on daily basis official statistical information, which will then be disseminated by social media platforms. State authorities should emphasize the importance of scientific approach to Covid-19, which by implication is countering disinformation.

b) companies/platforms should maintain their regular standards in fight against misinformation. It might be considered whether assigning special moderators to articles dealing with Covid-19 is justified to strengthen the countering of misinformation.

c) civil society should hold high the principle of access to information and freedom of expression.

Finland

Finland has done good pilot on involving social media influencers and sending them facts on corona. This has been very efficient way to combat misinformation that comes through social media channels.

Germany

a) State authorities should ensure that public information shared on platforms only relates to essential public health issues. The acquiescence of companies to be a magnifier for governmental information should not be misused.

b) Platforms should more transparently communicate the extent in which decisions to (not) delete content regarding presumed Covid-19 disinformation are made in order to facilitate human rights assessments.

c) Civil society should hold both state authorities and platforms accountable for balancing health and free speech interests and become involved in ensuring legitimacy and accountability in reigning in Covid-19 related disinformation.

Israel

All actors need to be more transparent. The government in Israel feared transparency since the policy changed so frequently and sometimes in an erratic way. Platforms should also be transparent and clear as to how they treat reports of misleading info. It is hard to define "truth" and "fake", but there is info where such designation is possible (for example attribution of info to official sources when it is or is not)

Italy

We think that state authorities and civil society should focus on improving awareness and knowledge of the mechanism of online information. Platforms and companies should address the issue of external transparency as well as that of protection of those users who are more exposed to disinformation.

Latvia

a) State authorities should continue their active presence in the social media, thus providing legitimate information as a way of fighting disinformation. In such a way, also the closeness between the leaders/decision-makers and the people is ensured.

b) Platforms should be more transparent on how the decisions on the modification of content are taken, i.e., when the post is reviewed by content moderators and when by the fact-checkers. Sudden deletions of posts give ground for the publishers to state they "have been censored". Additionally, the platforms should prioritise the official health-connected statements posted in the networks by the ministries and other state actors. A good initiative would be sending the users notifications as soon as such statements have been published.

c) The members of civil society which help Facebook in its fact check should be open about it. Other representatives should hold both state authorities and platforms accountable of balancing health and free speech interests.

Lithuania

a) Official information should be widely available. It should be timely, objective, and consistent. If new data lead to a change in an assessment of the situation, this should be indicated and explained (e.g., regarding the effectiveness of face masks). International co-operation should ensure that information is shared, in particular regarding the new research-based data on the virus and regarding the restrictive measures applied in other states. Specific efforts may be required to inform citizens who are abroad on the possibilities of returning to a home country (e.g. using services of mobile operators, call centers). Particular information and communication needs in the society should be identified based on surveys and other methods of sociological research.

b) Companies and platforms should take a socially responsible attitude and provide information to the users on where to find official information and how to make your own assessment on whether information published on the Internet is reliable. If fake news had been identified, this should be indicated to the public. Artificial intelligence-based solutions should be explored as a helpful tool to identify disinformation.

c) Remaining passive when faced with disinformation or knowingly contributing to disinformation should not be seen as normal. Civil society organizations can help identify disinformation and debunk it. They can also raise awareness of where to find official information and how to assess the reliability of information.

Moldova

The support of the EU in improving **the cyber resilience** of the R. Moldova. Something is being done in this regard, as the following source suggests: "On 8 April 2020 the EU published a comprehensive paper on how it is responding to the Coronavirus in the world. This includes announcements on mobilizing funds for its neighbours, with €962 million for the EaP states, and €700 million for the Western Balkans. This also includes reinforcing the fight against disinformation, naming the Russian sources of information disorders. This is particularly important for the EU's neighbours who are often in need of the EU's support to condemn the pro-Kremlin origins of the information warfare against them. Overall, the outbreak of Coronavirus once more highlighted that the EU should systematically fight against disinformation, and assure access to critical information and freedom of expression in its neighbourhood post-2020."[502]

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502 Tinatin Akhvlediani. Which spreads faster in the EU's neighbourhood: Coronavirus or disinformation ? 3 DCFTAs Op-ed No 13/2020, April 2020, p. 4.

https://3dcftas.eu/op-eds/which-spreads-faster-in-the-eu%E2%80%99s-neighbourhood-coronavirus-or-disinformation

The Resolution of the 2020 Media Forum of the Republic of Moldova *(Chișinău, 24-25 November 2020)* contains some specific recommendations for the Republic of Moldova, although it does not refer explicitly to online platforms[503].

Norway

a) State authorities should continue to provide the most up-to-date information about the status of Covid-19. Perhaps there could be increased transparency in relation to the purchasing agreements we have made in relation to vaccines, how they are tested and when we will get these. A lot of the disinformation in the media relates to vaccines, big pharma, and alternative treatment, which could be eliminate by improved transparency from the public health authorities and the government.

b) Companies/platforms should be more transparent in relation to fact checking and removing information about Covid-19. It was difficult to find information about how the platforms are dealing with disinformation, and to what extent this has been a problem. Increased transparency around this could be useful. Also, the highlighting or marking of disinformation is preferable to its removal. This would mitigate the potential problem of censorship by platforms, which would otherwise be a risk in situations where it is difficult to identify disinformation due to a general lack of knowledge (such as at the start of the pandemic). People would still have access to the information, including the disclaimer that the information is false/unreliable/misleading, which may help prevent the continued spreading of the disinformation through other channels as well as conspiracy theories and the like.

c) Civil society could continue to contribute to a diverse debate on Covid-19 and disinformation. Furthermore, people should be more critical of their sources and take care to double-check information before passing it on or sharing it on social media. The more sensational the information, the more thorough the fact check ought to be. It would also be helpful if people sought essential information from alternative sources to avoid the echo-chamber effect caused by social media algorithms.

Portugal (a)

State authorities enact and enforce media regulations. Companies/platforms acting as media should comply with such regulations and adopt self-regulation codes of ethics, the implementation of which should not be left only to bots. The implementation of info-ethics and media regulations by algorithms should be transparent and open to civil society movements and organizations. The answer to the machine is not only in the machine, as freedom of expression and information is not a matter of robots. Covid-19 related disinformation may serve economic purposes and political purposes and it is crucial to fight it so that the pandemics comes to an end as soon as possible but that in the meantime civil liberties are not gone way with Covid-19.

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503 Resolution of the 2020 Media Forum of the Republic of Moldova (Chișinău, 24-25 November 2020): https://www.mediaforum.md/upload/resolution-fmm-2020pdf-5fca34ecb8d93.pdf

Portugal (b)

In my view, it is urgent to activate the strengthening of community outreach intervention, innovating spaces for meeting and social coexistence.

Reinforce environmental and ecological sustainability programs related to the ways of life of populations and communities.

Contribute to the flexibilization of home space for the most vulnerable groups by reducing situations of violence and conflict.

Serbia

State authorities should work on raising awareness of the dangers of disinformation and promote the use of authoritative sources. They should support the activities of independent fact-checking organizations.

The platforms should ensure that content moderators are in place to complement technological solutions and cooperate with local actors to confront Covid-19 related disinformation. In line with corporate social responsibility, the platforms should adopt a self-regulatory framework concerning Covid-19 related information's politics.

Civil society should investigate cases of the Covid-19 related disinformation through platforms and notify both state actors and the platforms about established cases. Besides, NGOs should support studies on freedom of expression and its limitations and make an effort to catch the platforms' attention.

South Africa

a) There is a plethora of regulations, some of them contradictory, and often interpreted differently by different authorities. This was particularly problematic in the stricter stages of the lockdown, when police were arresting individuals for conduct that was not rendered criminal under the regulations themselves. While the government has acknowledged and attempted to address some of the contradictions, the sheer volume and complexity of the regulations have made it difficult or impossible for people to comply with them. In this way, misinformation is almost built into the regulations themselves. So, we would recommend a thorough overhaul of the regulations to ensure transparency and consistent interpretation of the applicable rules. We also recommend that the SA government monitor compliance with, and enforce its own regulations requiring social media platforms to remove misinformation.

b) Platforms need to use more sophisticated misinformation detection algorithms than the prevailing "blacklisted" terms approach. In particular, platforms should be more sensitive to satire, genuine disagreement, speculation on questions that do not yet have definitive scientific answers, and commentary on fake news. Furthermore, given the inexactitude of misinformation detection, there needs to be more transparency in the algorithms being used, and an appeals process for takedowns. That way platform users

who are committed to combatting misinformation can trust the system and effectively form part of a "crowd sourced" body of fact checkers and people who will not re-share dubious claims.[504]

c) Civil society should act to enhance the public understanding of Covid-19 and pressure the state for more transparency in the regulation process and more disclosure of the data underlying policy decisions being made. Civil society should also more clearly draw the line between evidence and policy conclusions and avoid the temptation to argue that opposing a policy which is based on sound evidence is tantamount to rejecting the evidence itself - as this opens the floodgates for political disagreement to spill over into misinformation.

Spain

a) **Authorities** must be responsible and implementation of combined non-legislative and legislative measures to combat disinformation should be taken. Legislation should regulate (as the French Law - Loi organique n° 2018-1201 du 22 décembre 2018 relative à la lutte contre la manipulation de l'information, for example):

 - The implementation of an accessible and visible reporting mechanism;

 - The transparency of algorithms; the promotion of content from press and news agencies and from audio-visual communication services;

- The fight against accounts disseminating false information on a massive scale;

 - The information to the users on the nature, origin and modalities for dissemination of content;

- The identity of individuals providing remuneration in return for the promotion of information content; and the promotion of media literacy.

 In Spain, a recommendation was adopted in March 2018 by the Joint Cybersecurity Working Group on misinformation and election misinformation. Despite being non-binding, the Committee asked the government to cooperate with the EU in developing strategies against misinformation.

b) If **platforms** do not want to be responsible for the content uploaded by their users, they are required to prevent the availability of content that infringes on copyrights. This duty should be understood as an imposition of content filters, both because of their suitability to control large amounts of content, due to the background and preparatory documents of the DAMUD[505] and the very wording of Article 17 DAMUD). See also: Recommendation 2018/334 European Commission, 1 March 2018, measures against illegal content. Governments must finance research regarding Artificial Intelligence (AI) to avoid disinformation. In this regard, consideration may be given to a research project funded by BBVA Foundation: Intelligent characterization of the veracity of information associated with COVID-19.

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504 https://www.cabc.org.za/reports/2020-04-09-mis-dis-information-careza-6th-april-%202020/ https://www.cabc.org.za/reports/2020-04-09-mis-dis-information-careza-5th-april- 2020/; https://www.cabc.org.za/about-us; https://factcheck.afp.com/about-us; https://africacheck.org/reports/live-guide-all-our-coronavirus-fact-checks-in-one-place

505 Directive 2019/790 of the European Parliament and of the Council 17 April 2019 on copyright and related rights in the digital single market (DAMUD)

c) **Civil society** must act in a responsible way; it must hold authorities accountable for being respectful with the laws.

Additional studies or articles on the role of platforms (especially during Covid-19)

Albania:

Open Society Foundation. (2018) LANDSCAPE OF ONLINE MEDIA IN ALBANIA - Survey with online media. Available at: https://www.osfa.al/sites/default/files/peizash_i_medias_online.pdf.

Argentina

https://observatoriolegislativocele.com/el-rol-activo-de-las-plataformas-en-tiempos-de-pandemia-un-repaso-de-sus-politicas-y-los-vacios-que-comienzan-a-surgir/
https://www.argentina.gob.ar/aaip/enlosmedios https://www.alai.lat/el-rol-y-la-importancia-de-las-plataformas-digitales-en-respuesta-a-la-crisis-sanitaria-y-de-recuperacion-economica-causada-por-el-covid19/ https://www.argentina.gob.ar/sites/default/files/el_futuro_despues_del_covid-19_0.pdf

Belgium

Report of the Belgian expert group on fake news and disinformation (pre-Covid-19): Alaphilippe, A., De Marez, L., Gerlache, A., Lievens, E., Pauwels, T., Picone, I., Rouvroy, A., "Verslag van de Belgische expertengroep inzake fake news en desinformatie", juli 2018,

https://www.dropbox.com/s/99iza9kmbwjbels/20180718_rapport_onlinedesinformatieNL.pdf?dl=0

Research into teenagers' mental well-being and social media use during the corona period (Ghent University):

https://www.ugent.be/ps/communicatiewetenschappen/nl/actueel/nieuws/resultaten.htm

News in times of corona time: How do Flemish people experience the news about the coronavirus and how do they deal with fake corona news? (Artevelde Hogeschool, Ghent)

https://www.arteveldehogeschool.be/sites/default/files/projectfiche/coronanieuwsrapport-fin.pdf

Advice of the Flemish Strategic Advisory Council for Culture, Youth, Sports and Media (pre-Covid-19)

https://cjsm.be/sarc/SR_media/adviezen/20180720_Aanbevelingen_fake_news_en_informatieverstoring.pdf

Bosnia and Herzegovina

https://www.rferl.org/a/osce-concerned-about-measures-against-fake-news-in-bosnia/30507012.html
https://detektor.ba/2020/04/01/ruski-dezinformacijski-videi-o-koronavirusu-prevode-se-i-dijele-na-mrezama-u-bih/
http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/drustvene-mreze-kliconose-dezinformacija-i-panike
https://www.media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/zastarjelim-ili-nedorecenim-zakonima-u-borbu-protiv-laznih-vijesti
https://ba.voanews.com/a/ruske-dezinformacije-o-koronavirusu-prevode-se-i-dijele-na-mrezama-u-

bih/5354958.html

https://www.media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/istrazivanje-korisnika-interneta-pod-krinkom-borbe-protiv-dezinformacija

https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/24/pravo-na-informaciju-i-privatnost-drugacije-zrtve-koronavirusa/?lang=sr

https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2019/05/Dezinformacije_u_online_sferi_Slucaj%20BiH_BHS.pdf (not related to Covid-19 disinformation specifically)

https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Research-publication-1-BiH-ENG.pdf

Croatia

Research study was made for Croatia by the Centre for Peace Studies on 23 March 2020: Coronavirus Covid-19 outbreak in the EU - Fundamental Rights Implications

(https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/croatia-report-covid-19-april-2020_en.pdf)

Cyprus

https://www.finexpertiza.cy/covid-19-real-value-of-technology/

https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/03/29/coronavirus-foreign-ministry-announces-special-platform-coming-tuesday-for-students-abroad/

Denmark

Countrywise, one could say that the situation in Denmark is very similar to the report generated by the EU https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2020-coronavirus-pandemic-eu-bulletin-1_en.pdf

Germany

https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/messengerdienst-telegram-gegenoeffentlichkeit-fuer-corona.2907.de.html?dram:article_id=476534

https://correctiv.org/faktencheck/hintergrund/2020/05/12/datenanalyse-nutzer-finden-fragwuerdige-corona-informationen-vor-allem-auf-youtube-und-verbreiten-sie-ueber-whatsapp

https://socialmediawatchblog.de/2020/05/06/warum-so-viele-menschen-an-corona-verschwoerungstheorien-glauben/

https://netzpolitik.org/2020/wenn-die-eltern-ploetzlich-an-verschwoerungstheorien-glauben-corona-pandemie/

Israel

1. https://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1001321971

2. https://nocamels.com/2020/03/israeli-coronavirus-humor-unrestrained/

3. https://www.inss.org.il/publication/coronavirus-and-post-truth-seminar/

Italy

Cinelli, Matteo, Walter Quattrociocchi, Alessandro Galeazzi, Carlo Michele Valensise, Emanuele Brugnoli, Ana Lucia Schmidt, Paola Zola, Fabiana Zollo, and Antonio Scala. 2020. 'The Covid-19 Social Media Infodemic'. Scientific Reports 10 (1): 16598. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-73510-5.

Lovari, Alessandro. 2020. 'Spreading (Dis)Trust: Covid-19 Misinformation and Government Intervention in Italy'. Media and Communication 8 (2): 458–61. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v8i2.3219.

Lovari, Alessandro, and Nicola Righetti. 2020. 'La comunicazione pubblica della salute tra infodemia e fake news: il ruolo della pagina Facebook del Ministero della Salute nella sfida social al Covid-19'. Mediascapes journal 0 (15): 156–73. https://ojs.uniroma1.it/index.php/mediascapes/article/view/17079.

Moscadelli, Andrea, Giuseppe Albora, Massimiliano Alberto Biamonte, Duccio Giorgetti, Michele Innocenzio, Sonia Paoli, Chiara Lorini, Paolo Bonanni, and Guglielmo Bonaccorsi. 2020. 'Fake News and Covid-19 in Italy: Results of a Quantitative Observational Study'. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health 17 (16). https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17165850.

Rovetta, Alessandro, and Akshaya Srikanth Bhagavathula. 2020. 'Covid-19-Related Web Search Behaviors and Infodemic Attitudes in Italy: Infodemiological Study'. JMIR Public Health and Surveillance 6 (2): e19374. https://doi.org/10.2196/19374.

Ruiu, Maria Laura. 2020. 'Mismanagement of Covid-19: Lessons Learned from Italy'. Journal of Risk Research, 6 May 2020. https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2020.1758755.

Scaglioni, M., Carelli, P., Vittadini, N., Castellin, LG., Palano, D., and ; Sfardini, A; Villa, ML; Zanola, MT; Missaglia, F; Reggiani, E; González-Neira, A; Berrocal-Gonzalo, S; Panarari, M; Sala, M; Delmastro, M; Suffia, G; Razzante, R; Ziccardi, G; Ciccia Romito, C; Salluce, A; Nasti, I; Garassini, S. 2020. L'altro Virus. Comunicazione e Disinformazione al Tempo Del Covid-19. Milano: Vita e Pensiero. https://publicatt.unicatt.it/handle/10807/156239.

Latvia

Prevailing themes in disinformation, misinformation, and conspiracy theories during the Covid-19: Latvian case analysis. Available: https://www.lai.lv/viedokli/prevailing-themes-in-disinformation-misinformation-and-conspiracy-theories-during-the-covid-19-pande-855

In Summer 2020 the students of Political Science from the University of Latvia carried out research the how the Latvian society views the Covid-19 pandemic. The study, the summary of which can be found online (https://zurnalsiepirkumi.lv/lu-politikas-zinatnes-studenti-prezentes-petijumu-par-latvijas-sabiedribas-skatijumu-uz-covid-19-pandemiju/) points to some important tendencies. For example, approximately 70% of respondents indicated that they learned about current events from social networks and Internet portals; half of those surveyed noted that the government and the World Health Organization might be hiding some important information and slightly more than half of the respondents indicated that they had encountered misinformation or conspiracy theories in connection with the Covid-19 crisis. Typically the respondents had encountered such information on Facebook. The results of the study will be

summarised in a book that will be available to the general public next year; however, it must be noted that the study only reflects the time till July, while the real "wave" of pandemics and infodemics in Latvia started only in autumn.

Lithuania

The Covid-19 Management Strategy adopted by the Government of Lithuania on 10/06/2020 contains a chapter on informing the public and combating fake news, see https://lrv.lt/uploads/main/documents/files/Covid_19%20valdymo%20strategija_EN.pdf, p. 6-7 (and its implementation plan in Lithuanian language here https://koronastop.lrv.lt/uploads/documents/files/Covid-19%20valdymo%20strategijos%20planas.pdf , 1.7).

Moldova

In my view, alongside with the above mentioned, the following sources could serve as further research tracks:

To my mind, the Disinformation Resilience Index506 and COVID-19 Disinformation Response Index 2020507 delivered by the Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism", are of particular interest, specifically for the case of R. Moldova.

Thus, according to the 2018 Report508, in the Republic of Moldova, there are three major initiatives to expose and combat disinformation, including one that deals with reporting fake social media accounts used for promoting hostile narratives.

One of the first and the most significant initiative is the 'Stop Fals!' campaign initiated by the Association of Independent Press (API). Through this project, API aims to build the capacities of independent media and its network of member-constituents through specialized service provision. As a strange sign of the project's success, we can point to a fake (imitation) site called stopfals.com that appeared, promoting false debunking stories on the web under the real project's brand. It is important to mention that 'Stop False' has chosen not to limit itself to the web and disseminates its findings to local newspapers to reach a broader audience that does not necessarily have the access or skills to use the internet.

Unfortunately, the campaign only deals with local content. This limits the capability of the campaign to fight against all the pro-Kremlin narratives concerning the Republic of Moldova that come from original Russian sources, and sometimes even Western media. This project can be best described as a useful tool to monitor local media and promote 'fake news' awareness culture in the country.

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506 For the year 2018 see: http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI_CEE_2018.pdf

For the year 2020 see: http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/DRI2020WebFIN.pdf

507 http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/DRI2020WebFIN.pdf

508 Disinformation Resilience in Central and Eastern Europe, Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism", Kyiv, 2018, p. 230-232: http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI_CEE_2018.pdf

The Sic.md project has ambitious goals to identify lies, inaccuracies and manipulations in public impact statements and inform citizens in a simple and accessible way. Sic.md also deals with monitoring the public promises of politicians as well as notifying breaches of ethics in media and public declarations.

The website has a very user-friendly interface. The team strives to have daily posts that represent a synthesis of the day and long reads on complex issues linked to media manipulation. The website also has a report section for a user to email the debunking team.

Among the limitations of this initiative is that it is limited to one website, compared to 'Stop Fals!', which publishes its articles on several websites and newspapers. Additionally, it does not have a developed communications component, most likely because of a lack of resources. Sic.md also can be considered a tool for political accountability, including for pro-Kremlin politicians' declarations, which expands its coverage compared to the 'Stop Fals!' campaign.

The TROLLESS project was developed during the 2nd Media Hackathon 'The Fifth Power', organized by the Centre for Independent Journalism and Deutsche Welle Akademie. The primary purpose of the project, a browser extension, is to identify the sources of manipulation in new social media spaces and to isolate them.

The extension helps track false profiles or those who display suspicious or trolling activity on Facebook and other platforms. Users can report them for promoting interests, parties, ideas, causes, misinformation, manipulation, and distraction. This does not affect the availability of the fake accounts, but the people using the extension can see that those accounts have been reported and can analyze the situation accordingly. In 2018 The Trolless community had more than 800 users on the Chrome platform, and the authors were considering extending it to other platforms like Mozilla or Safari. This project deals exclusively with social media and is only available to users who have installed the extension in Google Chrome.

The number of digital-debunking teams in Moldova is insufficient because of the limited resources available for this type of activity. All depend on foreign financial support and may not be sustainable for the long term if this support stops. According to the authors of the projects, the state has not shown interest in developing such initiatives and generally ignores the results of their activity.509

Also I would suggest to capitalize on the research conducted by:

Edda Humprecht, Peter Van Aelst, Frank Esser. Resilience to Online Disinformation: A Framework for Cross-National Comparative Research. Article in The International Journal of Press/Politics January 2020. DOI: 10.1177/1940161219900126

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338809208_Resilience_to_Online_Disinformation_A_Framework_for_Cross-National_Comparative_Research

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509 Disinformation Resilience in Central and Eastern Europe, Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism", Kyiv, 2018, p. 230-232: http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI_CEE_2018.pdf

Norway

A study carried out by the Norwegian Media Authority (Medietilsynet) has shown that 5 out of 10 Norwegians have seen fake news about Covid-19.510

Portugal (a)

In academia there are studies on the issue of how Covid-19 has been dealt with by media and social networks, such as for ex. the study of the MediaLad on the presence of the theme "Coronavirus" in Google searches, news and social networks since January this year, but with greater emphasis in the 30 days before March 2, the day on which the first cases of the disease in Portugal were officially confirmed. https://medialab.iscte-iul.pt/o-tema-coronavirus-nos-media-e-nas-redes-sociais/

Portugal (b)

Study 1. Social determinants and intervention with patients Covid 19: characterization and analysis of Social Service. With the following objectives: 1) to characterize and analyze the population infected by OVID-19 according to the socio-demographic and social risk profile; 2) to characterize the social constraints and conditions to be ensured in the hospital discharge plan, and post- discharge destination; 3) to identify and analyze the level of complexity of the social intervention with the population infected by Covid-19.

Study 2. Survey to Social Health Workers on the Emergency Plan of the Social Service against OVIDC-19: implications and strategies" (with version for Portugal and Spain). We intend to characterise the reorganisation of the intervention process of social workers in the health area in response to the emergency measures implemented in Portugal and Spain against the OVID-19 Pandemic, Congress: https://congresos.uned.es/w22392/

Serbia

https://fakenews.rs/wp-content/uploads/Korona-i-infodemija-u-Srbiji-2020.pdf

http://journal.singidunum.ac.rs/files/2012-9-2/role-of-social-media-in-serbia.pdf

South Africa

The Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change (CABC) monitors social media daily, recording and analysing the manipulation of data and the dissemination of false information. A comprehensive list of their reports (whether by day, week, or theme) is available on their website and on the repository provided by the online newspaper, Daily Maverick.

Real411 collects and analyses misinformation complaints, and analyses misinformation trends on social media. See also the Coronavirus Fact Check portal of the South African National Editors Forum and the Africa Check web page on misinformation regarding the Coronavirus.

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510 https://kommunikasjon.ntb.no/pressemelding/naer-halvparten-av-befolkningen-har-sett-falske-nyheter-om-koronautbruddet?publisherId=89456&releaseId=17882708

Sources:

- https://www.cabc.org.za/reports/2020-04-09-mis-dis-information-careza-6th-april-2020/;
- https://www.cabc.org.za/reports/2020-04-09-mis-dis-information-careza-5th-april-2020/;
- https://www.cabc.org.za/about-us;
- https://www.cabc.org.za/how-we-work;
- https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/author/centre-for-analytics-and-behavioural-change/;
- https://www.cabc.org.za/reports/2020-07-24-civil-unrest-report-commentary-14-july-20-july-2020/;
- https://sanef.org.za/africa-checks-coronavirus-fact-checks-portal/;
- https://africacheck.org/reports/live-guide-all-our-coronavirus-fact-checks-in-one-place/;
- https://real411.org/

Spain

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Annex

Making Sense of Conspiracy Theories[511]

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Most conspiracy thinking does not create brand new theories, but instead assembles speculations out of existing narratives, images and fears. Like viruses themselves, conspiracy theories adapt to new environments, mutating and recombining strands of cultural DNA. People who already view the world through a lens of a conspiracy theory quickly interpret current events as a part of that conspiracy. This is what is happening with the coronavirus pandemic. In these theories the identity and ultimate goal of the conspiracy is often hazy and shifting, but the basic story is that the pandemic is part of a much larger plot by a group of unaccountable and secretive elites who have been in control of events for decades, perhaps even centuries. This is one of the main narrative formulae of conspiracy theories, and we've seen versions of this before, from stories about the Illuminati, to recurrent outbursts of antisemitism. As with most conspiracy theories, the coronavirus accusations often make a large, speculative leap from some known facts to draw a seemingly surprising conclusion, but a conclusion that is often known in advance. Unlike scientific theories that test a hypothesis against new evidence, conspiracy theories often go in search of factoids that will "confirm" an existing conclusion. Yes, for example, the Gates Foundation did provide funding to the Pirbright Institute in the UK to aid its work on a vaccine for a strain of coronavirus that affects livestock poultry; and yes, Gates has long advocated and funded vaccination programmes for the world's poor, and has taken a keen interest in promoting preparedness for potential pandemics, including a scenario-planning exercise coordinated by Johns Hopkins University in October 2019 that modelled an outbreak of a flu virus. But neither of these verified facts warrants the conclusion that Gates is the mastermind of a fiendish conspiracy to institute mind control or genocide on the world's population.

Alongside billionaire philanthropists such as Bill Gates and George Soros (with the latter often a dog-whistle call to antisemitic theories), the conspiracy theorists sometimes blame actual global institutions like the United Nations and World Health Organisation, as well as imaginary ones such as the Illuminati (who were a real secret society of students promoting Enlightenment philosophy in Bavaria in the late eighteenth century, but who disappeared after they were banned by the authorities after little over a decade in existence). The sprawling community of QAnon believers – at first in the US, but now spreading rapidly in various European countries including the UK – soon wove the emergence of COVID-19 into their existing conspiracy fantasy: a lurid theory that a cabal of Satan-worshipping paedophiles – encompassing

the so-called "Deep State," leading Democrats, the mainstream media and the Hollywood elite – is secretly controlling the world. They are convinced that President Trump is fully aware of what is happening, and, when the prophesised moment is right, will unleash a second civil war (the "Coming Storm"), leading to the arrest and execution of all the enemies. The whole plot is supposedly being revealed in a series of cryptic messages posted on fringe online message boards inhabited by the alt-right by a figure called Q, an anonymous whistle-blower working with the intelligence agencies with top-level security clearance. The followers of Q obsessively speculate on the meaning of these obscure clues, that read as if they are a spoof of spy talk gleaned from trashy thrillers, but now increasingly wrapped up in the language of evangelical prophesy. The pandemic has added fuel to the flames of the QAnon conspiracy theory, drawing more people into the online community that then began to spill over into real-world anti-lockdown demonstrations.

Hosted on libertarian, wilfully politically incorrect and deeply misogynistic platforms like 4Chan and 8kun, QAnon has since its emergence in 2017 allowed its followers to indulge in masculinist fantasies of armed resistance to those they view as an unpatriotic elite. Yet with the coronavirus pandemic this alt-right conspiracy community has begun to converge with the New Age wellness community. These new converts, many of whom are women, are concerned that the pandemic will lead to mandatory vaccination programmes. Their Instagram posts are not the hate-filled, sexist, racist and sarcastic memes that are the staple of alt-right message boards, but instead offer tear-jerking calls to #savethechildren from the evil conspiracy of paedophiles, all in pastel colours.

What are we to make of these conspiracy theories? As Hollywood films have long recognised, part of the appeal of conspiracy thinking is that dizzying, exhilarating moment of panic that even the hardened sceptic can succumb to: what if it's all true? What if everything we are told is a lie? For most people, however, that initial moment of conspiracy rush subsides. For those who are not true believers, it is then tempting to dismiss conspiracy theories as, at best, cynical shit-posting, or, at worst, the delusional ravings of a dangerous political fringe. But conspiracy theories are widespread, and they matter. Surveys show that most people now believe in at least one conspiracy theory. In the case of the coronavirus pandemic, roughly a quarter of people in the UK and the US believe that the pandemic was deliberately planned, for example. And belief is connected to behaviour. At the extreme end, in the UK and other European countries there were over a hundred attacks on mobile phone masts. Perhaps more worrying, a third of respondents in surveys say that they would refuse a COVID-19 vaccination, even if it had been approved as safe.

Why do people believe in conspiracy theories? How do conspiracy theories work? And what should we do about them?"

There are three cardinal rules of conspiracy theory: nothing is as it seems; nothing happens by accident; and everything is connected. Conspiracy theories provide alternative explanations of significant happenings like wars, assassinations and plagues, and are usually presented in opposition to received wisdom. In some countries and regimes, however, they are the official version of events. Conspiracy theories usually start from visible effects in the present, and construct a story based on the conviction that someone deliberately planned to bring those events about. That well-known philosopher of history, Homer Simpson, concluded that "shit happens," but the conspiracy theorist insists that there are no accidents or coincidences in history. Conspiracy theories ask "who benefits?," and work their backwards to identify the conspirators who must therefore have planned everything. If the coronavirus pandemic is likely to lead to some pharmaceutical companies making big profits by selling vaccines, the logic is that they must have planned

it in advance. Conspiracy theories often (but not always) are populist in outlook, seeing history as a struggle between the innocent people and the corrupt elites, by-passing the usual structures of party politics. In general, they divide the world into a battle between good and evil, insiders and outsiders, Us vs Them, finding convenient scapegoats to blame for complex problems. In some cases conspiracy theories serve to forge a sense of community: QAnon believers can resemble a cult at times, for example, and particular online conspiracy spaces can generate a powerful sense of being one of the enlightened few who are in-the-know. But often that sense of community and identity is constructed by blaming other groups for social ills. In more extreme versions, the conspirators are portrayed as evil and subhuman, who will stop at nothing to achieve their devilish plans. Conspiracy theories are frequently apocalyptic in tone, insisting urgently that the future of the nation or the liberty of the people hangs by a thread.

Conspiracy theories are often accused of simplifying complex events. It's true that they do tend to create simplistic overarching explanations. But at the level of detail, conspiracy theories often end up constructing phenomenally complicated accounts. One reason they do this is because they start from the assumption that everything is connected: even seemingly unconnected events and people are all part of a fiendishly convoluted plot. Unlike scientific theories, conspiracy theories are usually unfalsifiable. If you try and debunk them by pointing to the lack of credible supporting evidence, the conspiracy theorist will often claim that the lack of evidence is proof in itself: the conspiracy is so all-powerful, the argument goes, that they have managed to cover up any trace of their existence. If people in the media, government or science seem to have evidence that undermines the theory, then they must be shills for the conspiracy. In this way, conspiracy theories become ever more elaborate, relentlessly incorporating any conflicting evidence into an ever larger plot, even if the fundamental story arc is depressingly simplistic and repetitive. For this reason, it can be incredibly frustrating to argue against conspiracy theorists, but you have to admire their ingenuity in providing an answer to any conceivable objection. Making the situation worse, conspiracy theorists often create a circular trail of reference: when you follow up their obsessive footnotes and links, you quite often find they refer to other conspiracy theorists, who in turn refer to others, and so on in a circle of citation that creates a veneer of credibility. What makes the situation more troubling now is that conspiracy theories often suggest that traditional sources and institutions of authoritative information – professional journalism, the law, the civil service, governing officials, science – are all part of the conspiracy. There is an increasing knee-jerk response to delegitimise all forms of expertise as corrupt and self-serving. In this situation, there is diminishing hope that appealing to facts and experts will cut any ice with a committed conspiracy theorist.

Arguing against conspiracy theorists is difficult not just because of the unfalsifiability of their views. It is also because in many cases their beliefs are an expression of a deeply held worldview. In the same way that people with a strong religious commitment often turn to theological arguments to help rationalise their emotional investment in their faith, so too do conspiracy theories serve as a way to justify strong feelings of resentment and injustice. (And it therefore makes sense that recognisably modern, all-encompassing conspiracy theories begin to emerge in the late eighteenth century, at the moment when religious belief in providence as an over-arching explanation of how everything has been plotted by God began to wane.) Although for many people flirting with conspiracy theories is no more than idle speculation and or cynical provocation, for some committed believers a conspiracist mindset is tied up with their life history and sense of identity. Many QAnon and alt-right conspiracy believers, for example, talk about "red pilling," the moment when they came to feel that everything the mainstream media are telling them is a lie. Changing

your mind about a conspiracy theory is therefore not simply a matter of revising your opinion about a set of disputed facts in the light of new evidence. It might mean unravelling your sense of who you are and how the world works.

Although there can be a kernel of truth in most conspiracy theories, they often make a speculative leap beyond what is warranted by the evidence. But even if in a literal sense they might not be accurate, that doesn't mean that they are completely unhinged from reality. In fact, in many cases conspiracy theories give voice to a distrust of the authorities and the powerful that is understandable. Conspiracy rumours about HIV/AIDS being created as a biowarfare agent to commit genocide on the African American population are unfounded, for example, but they speak to a long history of neglect on the part of the medical establishment and the US government (the most notorious example being the Tuskegee syphilis study, in which doctors continued to monitor the long-term effects of syphilis in a group of black men, long after antibiotic treatment for the disease became available). Likewise with some coronavirus conspiracy theories, it is not unreasonable to have concerns about vaccinations, or to have doubts about the government's approach to balancing the demands of health and economy in its response to the pandemic, or even to have misgivings about the financial incentives of multinational pharmaceutical companies. That doesn't mean that the specific allegations are true, but conspiracy theories nevertheless often promise to explain What Is Really Going on.

The conspiracy theorist tends to adopt a stance of savvy, world-weary cynicism, always expecting the worst of officials and experts, all too ready to suspect anyone's motives as corrupt. This default "hermeneutic of suspicion" has much in common with the politically progressive project of critique that also tries to delve beneath the confusion of surface detail to find the real sources of power that shape our societies. Indeed, many commentators have worried that precisely because critique has come to resemble conspiracy theory it has run out of steam. But at the same time the conspiracy theorist's view of how history works is oddly naïve – gullible even. It can end up distracting us from a more convincing explanation of the world's problems, and diverting political energies from actually doing something about them. Where those trained in social sciences see the complex interaction of social and economic forces, powerful institutions, ideological persuasion and conflicts of vested interests, the conspiracy theorist personifies those abstractions and focuses instead on a story of the intentional actions of a small, but hidden group of conspirators. For the social scientist, there is no need for a conspiracy theory to explain why, for example, the 1% succeed in shaping the world to their will. The elite as a social class with shared interests openly pursue their transparent goals of self-advancement, and it does not take a secret conspiracy of obscure plotters for them to be able to achieve this. In addition, experience suggests that what we're witnessing with the pandemic is not the result of some four-dimensional chess (whether by Dominic Cummings or the Illuminati), but an omnishambles created by a government finding itself serially out of its depth, convinced of its superior wisdom and repeatedly resorting to cronyism.

Conspiracy theory, we might therefore say, functions as a form of pop sociology, with the crucial difference that (in Michael Butter's terms) it engages either in deflection (it identifies the right issue, but blames the wrong people) or distortion (it latches onto the right group to blame, but for the wrong reasons). It is not surprising that the more that people feel powerless in the face of political, financial and technological vested interests, the more they turn to narratives involving powerful but shadowy agents behind the scenes pulling the strings. It might be scary and depressing to believe that there is a vast, evil conspiracy secretly controlling events, but that can be oddly comforting because it leaves open the possibility that the righteous

might one day take hold of the levers of power themselves. There's a New Yorker cartoon that sums up the position that a lot of us find ourselves in. We know that there is probably not a vast conspiracy that has made the world as fucked up as it is, but we can't help shake the nagging feeling that it sure looks as if someone planned it. The cartoon shows a lone guy protesting on the street with a placard that reads, "We are being CONTROLLED by random outcomes of a complex system."

For some people conspiracy theories undoubtedly fulfil psychological needs, especially in times of crisis, conflict or rapid social change. The stories of how a particular individual came to embrace full-blown conspiracism are regularly fascinating and moving. Psychologists now tend to think that belief in conspiracy theories is not the product of abnormal psychology, but the result of cognitive biases that we all share to a greater or lesser extent, coupled with specific emotional and social needs. We are attracted to explanations that promise to make sense of the seeming randomness and complexity of current affairs; we like to feel that we are one of the clever few who have managed to see through the lies and manipulation; we are drawn to theories that make us feel not so powerless; and we reach out for compelling accounts of why our particular group or nation is being victimised. But these insights into the psychological mechanisms at work downplay other social and political reasons why sizeable numbers of people are attracted to conspiracy thinking in particular historical moments. People believe in conspiracy theories not (or, not merely) because they are misinformed or stupid or crazy or their brains are hard-wired to see patterns, but because conspiracy theories fulfil the need to find someone to blame for genuine problems in society. However, we also now need to be alert to the possibility that there are malicious groups (both foreign disinformation units, and domestic political groups and alt-right trolls) engaged in campaigns of so-called coordinated inauthentic behaviour on social media to promote conspiracy theories and other forms of "problematic information." Often the motivation is not to champion one particular alternative view but to sow the seeds of doubt about all evidence, science and expertise. The aim of polluting the online information environment is to increase distrust, stoke resentment and destabilise society, and this might well be the most damaging effect of online conspiracism.

Likewise, we need to think about the financial incentives of the "conspiracy entrepreneurs" who make a healthy living from promoting conspiracy theories, along with their side-line in snake-oil cures (e.g. "Modern Miracle Solution" and "Colloidal Silver"). Professional charlatans such as Alex Jones and David Icke make a living from peddling their speeches, books and other merch, and it was no surprise to find this latter veteran conspiracy-mongerer jumping on the bandwagon of the coronavirus pandemic with his ready-made conspiracy explanations that mix bizarre alien fantasies with all-too-familiar antisemitic myths. Finally, we need to be alert to the possibility that sometimes conspiracy theories are not the sincere expression of a deeply held belief, but are a pragmatic, tactical stance that people adopt to help bolster other positions they do genuinely believe. For example, research has shown that climate change conspiracy theories are often used strategically by those opposed to the political consequences of recognising climate change as real. If you are as a matter of ideological faith against government regulation of markets, then it's politically convenient to claim that climate scientists are corrupt and it's all a hoax.

The stereotypical picture of the conspiracy theorist is a socially awkward guy in his parents' basement, a keyboard warrior wearing a tin foil hat. But research has shown that this clichéd portrait is not entirely accurate. In general, men are no more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than women, but it all depends on the particular example. Surveys show that most hard-core moon landing conspiracy theorists are men, for example, but anti-vaxxers are more likely to be women. In a similar fashion, there's not that much

difference in general between young and old, black and white, religious or not when it comes to conspiracy belief, but once again it depends on the particular case. The only significant difference comes with income and education: the richer and the better educated you are, the less likely you are to believe in conspiracy theories. In the case of coronavirus conspiracy theories, for example, a recent survey in the US found that 48% of those with only a high school level of education think it is probably or definitely true that powerful people intentionally planned the COVID-19 outbreak, whereas only 15% of those with a postgraduate degree think that is the case. The only other significant predictor is that if you believe in one conspiracy theory, you tend to believe in many – which makes sense, if you start from the conviction that everything is connected.

But what about political belief: are those on the right wing more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than those on the left? Again, it all depends on context, not least where you live and what's happening politically. Belief in conspiracy theories is often partisan, with people – unsurprisingly – more likely to believe in conspiracy theories about the authorities when the party they identify with is not in power. (The exception to this rule is Trump, of course, who promoted conspiracy theories about Obama and Hillary Clinton when he was on the campaign trail, but continued to do so while in office.) Research in a number of countries indicates that in general conspiracy belief is higher at the extreme ends of the political spectrum. However, there are reasons to think that there is increasingly a connection between conspiracism and right-wing politics. If you think that, as Ronald Reagan famously said, government is the problem not the solution, then it stands to reason that you might well view any encroachment of the "nanny state" into your personal life as part of a bigger conspiracy to deprive you of your freedoms.

Conspiracy theories have a long history, but have the internet and social media made conspiracy theories go viral? There are good reasons to think that the internet and conspiracy theory are made for one another. Not only is it simple for anyone to distribute professional-looking materials online with virtually no gate-keeping and at incredible speed, but it is now easy to find a like-minded audience in ways that were unthinkable in the past. Some commentators have suggested that conspiracy theorists often become trapped in digital "echo chambers" where they only engage with like-minded fellow believers. This is coupled with the power of search engine results to create a "filter bubble" effect, in which individuals only receive information that reinforces their blinkered worldview. While this is undoubtedly sometimes the case, the online world is far more diverse than the filter bubble and echo chamber theories suggest. Search engine results are rarely completely uniform, and online communities are seldom totally immune to outside influence. People's media diet is in reality quite varied. When an echo chamber does emerge online, it is not necessarily caused by the inherent nature of the technology itself but by a process of social self-selection by participants that is also visible in the offline world. Likewise, there is a tendency to exaggerate the power of online communication, suggesting that viral memes – like actual viruses – can take over the mind and body of a vulnerable recipient, brainwashing them. Those who engage in online conspiracy communities are far from passive, and we therefore need to understand both their personal involvement but also the group dynamics that particular platforms generate.

However, fuelled by the financial incentive of encouraging ever more divisive, emotive and engaging content, the recommendation algorithms of social media platforms can end up pushing some users down the rabbit hole of radicalisation. With their seductive rhetoric, conspiracy theories play a central role in this process. The social media companies have been slow to acknowledge the role that their platform design choices play in encouraging the spread of harmful misinformation and hateful extremism, hiding behind

the defence that their algorithms are merely giving people more of what they like. But this ignores the tendency of the recommendation algorithms to promote content that is ever more extreme. In the case of Dylann Roof, who killed nine African Americans in a church in Charleston in 2015, detectives were able to reconstruct his browser history, showing his online journey into violent white supremacism. In the face of a public outcry about this and other mass shootings in which the gunman had clearly been heavily invested in online racist conspiracy-mongering, social media platforms such as YouTube began in 2019 to remove some conspiracist content and reduce its prominence by changing their algorithm. With the coronavirus pandemic, the platforms have taken a more proactive stance on content moderation, removing material that promotes harmful medical information relating to COVID-19. In October 2020, Facebook, for example, announced that it will ban ads that merely discourage people from getting vaccinated, tightening up their earlier ban on ads that actively promoted vaccine misinformation. But the volume, speed and viral spread of misinformation means that often the platforms are trying to close the stable door long after the horse has bolted. Ultimately, their business model is based on stoking controversy to generate engagement and advertising revenue, and conspiracy theories fit the bill perfectly.

If, as we've been arguing, conspiracy theories are highly resistant to correction, no amount of fact checking, flagging mechanisms and promotion of accurate information on the part of the platforms are likely to make much difference. Those approaches are just as likely to make red-pilled conspiracy theorists dig in their heels, convinced that Silicon Valley is itself part of the conspiracy to suppress the truth. Conspiracy theories about the coronavirus are spreading not so much because people are unable to access vital information, but because they distrust official sources of information – even fact checkers. That doesn't mean we should give up on putting out correct information about COVID-19 and linking to point-by-point debunking of conspiracy myths, but we need a sense of realism that the facts won't simply speak for themselves and win the argument.

So, what can we do about conspiracy theories in the time of corona? First, independent regulation of social media platforms is vital, although we have to recognise that it is not a panacea, and it needs to be nuanced. Outright deplatforming is sometimes necessary for content that clearly promotes hatred and violence, but making borderline problematic content harder to find or demonetising it might be enough to help stop some stories going viral. One of the investigations we are running on the Infodemic project is into the effectiveness of the various changes that internet companies have introduced during the pandemic. Social media platforms need to change their algorithms to ensure that they are not actively promoting harmful conspiracy materials, and they need to allow independent auditing of their black-box technologies. Second, we need to choose which battles to fight. Hard-core believers often make up only a small percentage of the total number of those who show an interest in a conspiracy theory, and they might well be a lost cause. It therefore makes more sense to engage with people who don't fully believe in a theory, but don't fully disbelieve in it either. Teaching analytical thinking skills and digital media literacy are undoubtedly an important tool in the fight against the pollution of the online information ecosystem, but they have their limitations. For one thing, conspiracy theorists often seem to have learned the lessons of information literacy all too well: they are the first to cast suspicion on a story in the press, pointing out the vested interests and the techniques of persuasion.

But this might give us our first way in. If you're so sceptical, this line of engagement goes, then maybe you need to be a bit more sceptical about your own beliefs and sources of information, including taking a closer look at the financial motives of conspiracy entrepreneurs, and getting them to consider with a more

sceptical eye what else would need to be the case if there really was a secret cabal pulling the strings behind the scenes as they claim. Of course, there is no guarantee that this approach will have any effect, but it has the advantage of opening up a conversation, rather than instantly descending into a face-off of my facts against your facts. Establishing a sense of connection with a conspiracy believer is crucial. Tempting though it is to ridicule anyone willing to even entertain such ideas, we need to show a bit of empathy. We need to understand that conspiracy theories can be a way for people to give vent to a sense of grievance about the injustices of the world (or, at the very least, their own situation in life). Those grievances are often very real, even if the specific theories and scapegoats are wide of the mark. Conspiracy theorists are often motivated by a sense of justice or patriotism or anger that we all can identify with, even if we think that their explanations of what is happening are completely mistaken. We also need to recognise the pleasures and thrills of conspiracy theorising, to try to understand why these kinds of story are so appealing to so many people. It's unlikely, however, that the popularity of conspiracy theories is going to diminish unless people have more reason to trust that we are all, genuinely, in this together.

EU COST Action – CA19143: Global Digital Human Rights Network

The GDHRNet COST Action will systematically explore the theoretical and practical challenges posed by the online context to the protection of human rights. The network will address whether international human rights law is sufficiently detailed to enable governments and private online companies to understand their respective obligations vis-à-vis human rights protection online. It will evaluate how national governments have responded to the task of providing a regulatory framework for online companies and how these companies have transposed the obligation to protect human rights and combat hate speech online into their community standards. The matters of transparency and accountability will be explored, through the lens of corporate social responsibility.

The Action will propose a comprehensive system of human rights protection online, in the form of recommendations of the content assessment obligation by online companies, directed to the companies themselves, European and international policy organs, governments and the general public. The Action will also develop a model which minimises the risk of arbitrary assessment of online content and instead solidifies standards which are used during content assessment; and maximises the transparency of the outcome.

The Action will achieve scientific breakthroughs (a) by means of a quantitative and qualitative assessment of whether private Internet companies' provide comparable protection of human rights online in comparison with judicial institutions, and (b) in the form of a novel holistic theoretical approach to the potential role of artificial intelligence in protecting human rights online, and (c) by providing policy suggestions for private balancing of fundamental rights online.

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