Chances and Risks of

Social Media

for Democracy

October 19, 2021

Contents

1. Summary

Over the past years' public communication and political debates have been marked by a fundamental shift to internet-based platforms and digital media channels. In this environment social media have become one of the main pillars of information and communication infrastructure, with essential influence on our public and democratic systems. Political elections and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic have highlighted the chances and risks social media pose to democratic systems in Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). The use of social media allows for more inclusive, transparent, and participative public debates, to name a few benefits. However, the immediate exchange of information on online platforms has exposed challenges for democracies and political systems. Online disinformation, manipulation of information and hate speech sow distrust in democratic institutions, cause political polarization and risks public disorder. Against the background of recent elections in both regions, the intentional spread of false information (disinformation) can disrupt key democratic processes and institutions. The question of how to better regulate and frame how disinformation is handled requires international cooperation and knowledge sharing between like-minded democratic countries.

The Future Affairs Compact addressed the "Chances and Risks of Social Media for Democracy" in a dialogue forum in October 2021. Following the Future Affairs in May 2019 and December 2020, this edition focused on the relevance of social media for democracy and the threat of disinformation to democratic systems. The dialogue was moderated by Ms. Carolina Chimoy, Deutsche Welle Correspondent in Washington D.C., with speakers from government, academia, and civil society.

The first panel, **"Political Insights",** was composed of Mr. Miguel Berger (State Secretary of the German Federal Foreign Office), Mr. Pablo Anselmo Tettamanti (Secretary of Foreign Affairs of the Argentine Republic) and Mr. Javier Zarzalejos (Member of the European Parliament and Vice-Chair of the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation). The speakers stressed that democracies in Europe and LAC are increasingly facing online disinformation campaigns and the spread of false information (misinformation) to manipulate the public opinion. This leads to a polarized public discourse and threatens the credibility and stability of democratic institutions. At the same time speakers highlighted that open social media are a powerful tool to strengthen freedom of expression, public control and opinion making. Communication via social media represents an essential part of the political and public debate. Lastly, speakers exchanged on frameworks and measures in fighting disinformation in Argentina, Latin America, the European Union and Germany.

The second panel, **"Setting the Scene",** discussed platform communication and online regulation and was composed of Ms. Amélie Heldt (Researcher, Power of Opinion & Digital Media, Leibniz Institute for Media Research, Germany), Mr. Paul Fehlinger (Co-Founder and Deputy Executive Director, Internet & Jurisdiction Policy Network, France) and Mr. Eduardo Ferreyra (Senior Project Officer, Asociación por los Derechos Civiles (ADC), Argentina). Speakers presented findings of positive and negative trends in online communication and explored aspects around digital content moderation. Considering that information is created and disseminated on social media platforms, decision makers and the public have to explore new frameworks to ensure a public debate based on democratic principles. Speakers emphasised the benefits of free online communication and highlighted that the root causes of disinformation had its origins in the offline world. In this sense, decision makers and societies have to explore agile frameworks and measures to govern online communication.

The third panel, **"Good Practices from the Regions",** was composed of Ms. Lisa Ginsborg (Acting Secretary-General EDMO Hub, European Digital Media Observatory, EU), Ms. Thamy Pogrebinschi (Senior Researcher, Berlin Social Science Center (WZB), Germany) and Ms. Laura Zommer (Executive Director and editor-in-chief of Chequeado). Speakers shared their research outcomes and presented examples of online fact checking platforms and initiatives for democratic participation. Media literacy, fact checking and research on best practices from different regional and national contexts is needed to increase public resilience. Speakers underlined the need to apply fact checking and content moderation regardless of different languages and regions. Policies and regulations for platform providers should be equally applied by all countries to be effective.

Graphic recording
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2. Topics + Best Practices

The following chapter presents a comprehensive summary of the main topics and examples being discussed during the three panels at the Future Affairs Compact 2021.

I. Governance and Regulation

Considering the fundamental changes in social communication over the last years and the harmful ways social media are used, democratic governments recognized the need to stronger govern the digital sphere. Thereby decision makers face the challenge of regulating online platforms on disinformation, hate speech or other harmful content without infringing on fundamental democratic rights such as freedom of expression. These rights are foundational for lively public debates and open exchange. However, the dissemination of dis-/misinformation on social media has gained impact on democratic systems and the harmful effects of targeted disinformation has been underestimated for a long time. Today there is a broader awareness that disinformation does not occur in isolated cases but is widely used at the service of political or individual interests to destabilize democratic systems, discredit institutions or obtain economic and political advantages. For instance, in Europe there is hardly any major political and public subject that has no (foreign) interference in terms of disinformation. Consequently, democratic governments acknowledge that strong regulatory responses and resilient frameworks are required to counteract such threats.

Social Media is used for information and disinformation

FAKE

The Internet & Jurisdiction Policy Network (I&JPN) Toolkits are a landmark policy resource for policymakers and practitioners seeking to develop better policies for the digital era.

Download the Internet & Jurisdiction Policy Network (I&JPN) Toolkits
(www.internetjurisdiction.net)

The regulation of online content lies in the realm of a state's (digital) sovereignty and legal frameworks have to be upheld in the digital sphere in the same way - What is illegal in the real world is illegal in the digital world as well. Hence, the regulation of social media should not be left to private actors controlling social media platform infrastructure and access of users. For instance, content moderation has been highly contested, as up to now private actors have mostly been the ones deciding on how to deal with dis-/misinformation on their platforms. This is problematic given that social media platforms are no public good but serve private interests and follow a business model that focuses on generating profit instead of serving public purposes. In addition, not all social media platforms have the same capacity for content regulation, given their resources and technological capabilities.

Governments, on the other hand, have been slow in implementing regulatory frameworks and tackling content moderation. Decision makers are still in an "experimental phase" in which policies and legislation is being explored on an ongoing basis as governments operate for the most part in "unexplored territory". Some examples of such legislation include the regulatory frameworks currently being introduced at the level of the European Union. It involves two major legislative proposals, the Digital Markets Act and the Digital Services Act, in addition to specific sectoral legislation which seek to balance prevention, sanctions, and positive incentives to counteract online disinformation.

The **Digital Markets Act** seeks to ensure fair and open digital markets.

The **Digital Services Act** establishes a set of rules to ensure a safe and accountable online environment.

While there is a need to counterbalance unilateral decisions taken by private actors in terms of content regulation to ensure transparency and due process, such measures can end up limiting the right to freedom of expression, and in extreme cases, leading to censorship. Regulations should therefore not have a predominantly punitive character and risk criminalizing those who spread dis-/misinformation.

This risk has been acknowledged by governments developing content moderation legislation. To illustrate, in Argentina and Germany, there has been a conscious attempt to counteract disinformation without diminishing the right to freedom of expression. In Argentina, social media was declared a subject of public interest and is therefore subject to quality and price regulations. In addition, during the elections held in September 2021, an Ethical Committee of several stakeholders, including political parties, social media, newspapers and civil society, was created to promote transparent

democratic debates. For its part, Germany implemented in 2017 the Network Enforcement Act (Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz), a law that allows the prosecution of social media platforms regarding illegal content online.

The Network Enforcement Act was adopted by the German government in 2017 with the aim of combating fake news in social networks.

Act to Improve Enforcement of the Law in Social Networks (bmjv.de)

Although these are significant advances, experts from government, academia and civil society demand better state regulation, enforcement mechanisms and, accordingly, sanctions to those individuals, enterprises or countries that consistently engage in harmful activities. Enforcement of the rule of law in the digital space is required to counter lawlessness online. Legal frameworks are needed to be tailored to regulate what happens in the digital world. To this end, governments need to act in an agile, flexible way and to be willing to test new framework, an approach which requires continuous multi-stakeholder dialogue between government, private actors and experts together with civil society (i.e. Dialogo de las Americas).

America's Dialogue arises as a response to the challenges currently presentedby digital technologies for the exercise of Human Rights in Latin America.

Página inicial – Diálogo de las Américas (www.americasdialogue.org)

Despite the necessity to counteract disinformation online, the underlying problems and root causes cannot simply be "regulated away": the problem does not only arise from online platforms, but from societies themselves. For Instance, in Latin America large social and political inequalities and polarisation exist, which also nurture online dissemination of false content and hate speech. The deeper question then is what is really coming from a platform and which are the problems that rather originate from society and are only mirrored by social media. Consequently, to identify the needs for governmental regulation, one has to take into account the rooted social and political conflicts undermining democracy and public debates.

To build an inclusive and democratic online information environment, social media providers can be an important part of the solution. As governments are aware that people worldwide, especially the youth, increasingly inform themselves and communicate through social media platforms, they use these platforms for their own ends. For instance, governments seek to foster democratic values through public communication and participation online. The German Federal Foreign Office, for example, has authorized all embassies and consulates to open social media accounts to provide and disseminate official information. Similarly, in Argentina, the focus has been to guarantee full access to internet and online technologies for the entire population, with the aim of using them as a tool for inclusion and information, i.e. during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Confiar is an online portal in Argentina for fact checking and information on topics and news related to COVID 19

Confiar / Telam
(telam.com.ar)

Online communication and the flow of information in the digital sphere became transparent through social media in a way it has never been visible before. Social media platforms provide the necessary infrastructure and technology (algorithms) and give access to users following their terms of service. This leads to an enormous influence by platform providers on social communication as they are making editorial decisions of what is being published or not and by whom.

To minimize harmful content and moderate mis-/ disinformation it is necessary to better understand how social media platform practices work and what online information flows look like. Therefore, providers have to work together with decision makers and increase the transparency on algorithms, standards, and data being used to operate their platforms. This access will allow experts and researchers to better understand the interdependencies on platforms and to be able examine who is responsible for content and by which channels (actors) information spreading occurs.

Government regulation on social media is often viewed with suspicion because of the risk of governments imposing rules that affect freedom of expression. However, if transparency of the platforms is improved, decision makers and users could better understand the practices of content moderation, and thus would be assured that such decisions follow legitimate and open processes. In this regard, greater transparency can increase the accountability of platform providers as well as share information for better framework regulation.

One of the most famous examples showing the need for transparent content moderation was evidenced by Twitter's permanent suspension of former US-President Donald Trump´s account in January 2021. This decision raised questions, i.e. what was the specific reason for banning the account, as content did not differ from tweets before and what about other political leaders, why is Twitter not taking measures against similar content of other politicians. In brief, the case shows that transparent processes are needed so that content moderation acquires legitimacy.

Decision makers must be aware that social media networks are neither traditional media nor ordinary private companies. The underlying business models (fees or advertisement) and practices of internet-based platforms play an important role in shaping social communication.
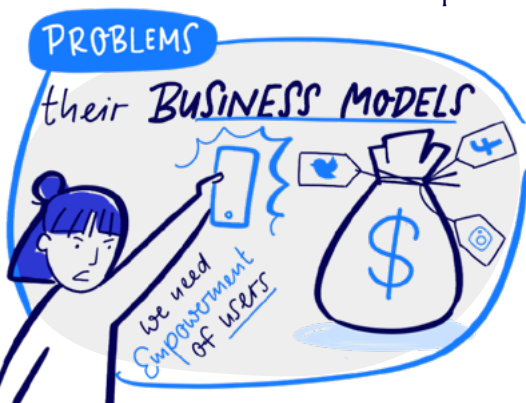
Bringing these insights together, there is a need for more academic research on this matter to provide scientific recommendations for decision makers setting the frameworks. So far there seems to be still a lack of academic research on how content moderation for online communications could function and how the spread of mis-/disinformation evolves. However, researchers would require better access to information from platform providers to come up with qualified academic results. Even within the European Union the information about research being conducted in this field is not yet made fully available. Therefore EDMO (European Digital Media Observatory) has been established to bring together researchers and fact checkers from different countries.

EDMO brings together fact-checkers, media literacy experts, and academic researchers to understand and analyse disinformation.

**EDMO – United against discrimination**

In the past, the ability to inform the public and spread news was left to a small elite and media functioned as a "one to many" communication. This has changed with the rise of social media, which allows for a "many to many" communication. Consequently, media consumption of people has diversified, and online platforms empower marginalized citizens with no or limited access to traditional media by providing access to public communication and political debates.

LATINNO is the first comprehensive database documenting participatory innovations in Latin America.

LATINNO: Innovations for Democracy in Latin America / WZB

Considering that people increasingly use social media as a news source and that the amount of online information has multiplied, it became more difficult to navigate through online content and decide whether something is right or false. Adding the speed and quality in which information is spread and manipulated there is a need to go beyond regulatory measures tackling mis-/disinformation. Awareness raising as well as digital and media literacy of users, content moderators and decision makers has to be part of the way forward.
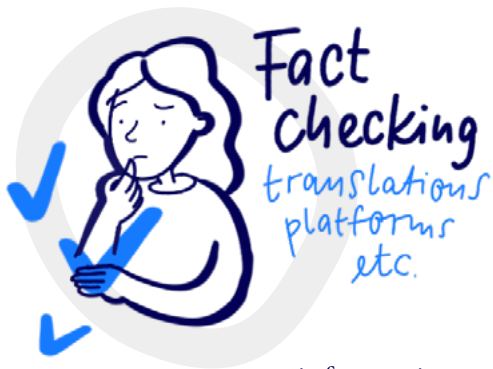
Fact-checking sites can be one of the most visible tools helping societies to distinguish truthful from false content. They do so by defining, signalling, and reporting information published online that does not correspond to reality or has a manipulative objective. While information provided on platforms does not necessarily have to be wrong (misinformation), it could be put simply in a different context that is misleading. Publishing fact-checking content does not change people's intentions but affects them publishing or sharing certain information, and even change their behaviour on disinformation. For instance, research conducted by the Latin American fact-checking platform Chequeado revealed that fact-checking can serve as a deterrent to not share false information in social media.

Chequeado is one of the main fact-checking platforms in Latin America.

PortalCheck is an initiative to present useful resources on how to check information and not share misinformation.

Nonetheless, although there are advancements in this field and networks have been established among fact-checkers, fact-checking platforms are also a partial answer to disinformation. First, because it is not a preventive mechanism as it comes only after news have already been published and disseminated. And second, because social media platforms and fact-checking sites mostly focus on one language, i.e. on English social media posts, and it would require fact-checking approaches for all other languages too.

Given these limitations, fact-checking services provided by dedicated websites and initiatives need to be complemented by a holistic approach that aims at framing online content and educating users on how to use social media responsibly. An additional approach to supplement media literacy efforts can be the so-called "collective intelligence". It means, enabling ordinary citizens to contribute with knowledge and ideas to address public efforts and problems. Collective intelligence measures have already been used to tackle disinformation and misinformation.

However, even though education is key to address disinformation, it is not a panacea either. It is important to remember that too much of a critical perspective on media can also undermine trust in media in general. In the end, societies need free, plural and independent media in which citizens are willing to trust. Moreover, education measures often do not yield in quick results as it aims at behavioural changes that occur in the long run.

All in all, improving digital and media literacy together with fact-checking skills are the basic set of competences for users' and decision makers' to critically analyse information and detect misleading or manipulated information.

IV. Knowledge sharing and the way forward

The discussions at the Future Affairs Compact 2021 highlighted existing consensus that measures to tackle mis- and disinformation in social media need to improve. However, the implementation remains contested and demands not only political will but also agile, inclusive, multi-stakeholder and nuanced approaches to succeed.
There should be an ongoing dialogue between like-minded stakeholders (decision makers, experts and companies) on national experiences and suitable frameworks.
It is also necessary to put in place international cooperation structures that allow to respond quickly to disinformation threats. To achieve that, continued support to media practitioners, researchers and civil society initiatives is required.

CROSS BORDER COOPERATION
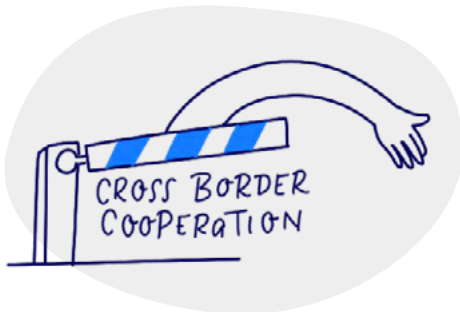
From the EU perspective, for example, one of the most important issues at this moment is how to strengthen these structures and generate synergies that have a preventive and reparative capacity. More generally, a mechanism to share best practices across borders and scale solutions that have proven to be successful is still to be defined. Cooperation of international stakeholders can support media practitioners, researchers, fact checkers and the public in this field with material on projects and initiatives on the topic.

Nonetheless, the underlying problem of mis-/disinformation in social media goes hand in hand with the loss of quality of the democratic debate. As long as emotions prevail over argumentation and facts in political debates, social media will only continue to mirror divided and polarized societies. To return to a democratic dialogue where opinions are expressed in a respectful manner, an integral approach through regulation, transparency and adequate media education is essential.

3. Speakers and Institutions

Mr. Miguel Berger

Mr. Miguel Berger is the State Secretary of the German Federal Foreign Office.

Ms. Carolina Chimoy

Ms. Carolina Chimoy is currently a US Correspondent in Deutsche Welle Washington Bureau.

Mr. Paul Fehlinger

Mr. Paul Fehlinger is the Deputy Executive Director and Co-founder of the Internet & Jurisdiction Policy Network.

Mr. Eduardo Ferreyra

Mr. Eduardo Ferreyra works for the Asociación por los Derechos Civiles (ADC) researching and reviewing policies and legislation affecting human rights in the digital realm.

Ms. Lisa Ginsborg

Ms. Lisa Ginsborg is Acting Secretary General of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO).

Ms. Amélie Heldt

Ms. Amélie Heldt is a researcher at the Leibniz Institute for Media Research | Hans-Bredow-Institut, Hamburg.

Ms. Thamy Pogrebinschi

Ms. Thamy Pogrebinschi is a senior researcher at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center and faculty member of the Berlin Graduate School of Social Sciences at the Humboldt University in Berlin.

Mr. Pablo Anselmo Tettamanti

Mr. Tettamanti is currently serving as the Secretary of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Argentina.

Mr. Javier Zarzalejos

Mr. Javier Zarzalejos is a Member of the European Parliament in the Group of the European People´s Party. He is Vice Chair of the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union.

Ms. Laura Zommer

Ms. Laura Zommer is the Executive Director and editor-in-chief of Chequeado, the first initiative of fact-checking and verification of public discourse in Latin America.

Photos were selected and sent by the speakers to the organizing team.

Full profiles are available at:
FA Compact 2021 (futureaffairs.eu)

4. Programme

5 pm (Berlin) — Welcome and Introduction

Moderator	**Ms. Carolina Chimoy**	Deutsche Welle

5:05 pm — Political Insights

	Political Insights – The role of policymakers in tackling disinformation	Democracies in Europe and LAC increasingly face disinformation campaigns and the spread of false information to manipulate the public opinion, which creates public polarization and threatens democratic institutions. At the same time, open social media are a powerful tool to strengthen freedom of expression, public control and the formation of opinions. Communication via social media is an essential component of political discourse. How do democratic governments tackle disinformation? How can they regulate social media whilst strengthening democratic processes and protecting fundamental civil rights online?
Speakers	**Mr. Miguel Berger**	State Secretary of the German Federal Foreign Office
	Mr. Pablo Anselmo Tettamanti	Secretary of Foreign Affairs of the Argentine Republic
	Mr. Javier Zarzalejos	Member of the European Parliament and Vice-Chair of the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation
	Q&A	

5:30 pm — Expert Panels

Moderator	**Ms. Carolina Chimoy**	Deutsche Welle

5:35 pm	Setting the Scene

	Setting the Scene: Disinformation and Democracy	For Europe as well as Latin America and the Caribbean online communication and its misuse is a "trending topic". News are disseminated rapidly through social media and influence public opinion making. What are current debates and trends in Latin America and Europe around digital content moderation, social media and disinformation? Experts from civil society and academia provide an analytical background and present the latest findings.
Speakers	Mr. Paul Fehlinger	Co-Founder and Deputy Executive Director, Internet & Jurisdiction Policy Network, France
	Mr. Eduardo Ferreyra	Senior Project Officer, Asociación por los Derechos Civiles (ADC), Argentina
	Ms. Amélie Heldt	Researcher, Power of Opinion & Digital Media, Leibniz Institute for Media Research, Germany
	Q&A	

6:15 pm	Good Practices from the Regions

	Good Practices from the Regions	Europe and LAC face the challenge of finding suitable solutions to tackle disinformation. In this dialogue examples of fact checking online content and ideas to strengthen democratic forces will be shared: What can Europe and LAC learn from each other in the fight against disinformation?
Speakers	Ms. Lisa Ginsborg	Acting Secretary-General EDMO Hub, European Digital Media Observatory, EU
	Ms. Thamy Pogrebinschi	Senior Researcher, LATINNO and Collective against the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Role of Civil Society in Endangered Democracies, Berlin Social Science Center (WZB), Germany Observatory, EU
	Ms. Laura Zommer	Executive Director and editor-in-chief, Chequeado, LatamChequea in partnership with UNESCO, funded by the EU
	Q&A	

7 pm	Wrap-up

5. Event Facts

Organizer: Federal Foreign Office

Conference information: 21.futureaffairs.eu