R8 Addressing the Structural Issues Underlying the Tide of Disinformation

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Agenda item: 1. Resolutions

Motion text

What is Disinformation?

Disinformation is false or misleading information spread intentionally in order to advance political or ideological goals, make profit, or create harm. It is different to misinformation, which is false information shared unintentionally. This resolution focusses on disinformation as it entails a motive to deceive, therefore perpetrators are more culpable for its consequences. Further, tackling disinformation reduces opportunities for misinformation to spread.

Why Should It Be Reduced?

Damage to Democracy

Disinformation undermines the democratic process by undermining access to truthful and reliable information. For example, the outcome of the UK’s 2016 referendum on EU membership is thought to have been influenced by false and misleading information spread intentionally through traditional and social media.

Undermining Trust

Disinformation both propagates general societal distrust and thrives when social distrust is high, creating a vicious circle. This was illustrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when disinformation about the virus led to distrust in health messaging from governments and health organisations, reducing vaccine uptake and health protective behaviour.

Impact on Marginalised Groups

Disinformation frequently entails the repetition of prejudiced and hateful narratives and tropes designed to reinforce existing power hierarchies that propagate racism, misogyny, xenophobia and transphobia. Further, marginalisation

leads to institutional distrust which increases vulnerability to disinformation. For example, a disproportionate number of COVID-19 deaths among minority ethnic groups throughout Europe was compounded by the proliferation of disinformation in these communities' media ecosystems.

Warfare

Disinformation forms part of information warfare: the use, control and manipulation of information to advance a belligerents' goals in a military conflict. For example, false narratives about the war were actively spread by Russian state-controlled media and social media as part of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Environmental Impact

Disinformation has deeply worrying implications for the vital transition away from fossil fuel dependency and unsustainable growth capitalism. Evidence shows that oil and gas companies have long been aware of the risks their industry poses to the climate, yet they have spread false information to instil doubt about it, enabling them to continue business as usual.

For the health of our societies, our communities and our planet, it is essential that we act to reduce, regulate and build resilience to disinformation. Our calls are broken into three areas of action: traditional media, social media and resilient societies.

1. Traditional Media

Limited ownership and control of traditional media creates the motive and opportunity for a powerful minority to spread disinformation to consolidate their power and grow their profit. To reduce disinformation, it is vital that traditional media ownership is diverse and independent, and that free speech and high quality journalism that holds power to account is not only preserved, but incentivised.

FYEG calls for:

- Recognition that media organisations are part of the infrastructure of democracy and should be run for the benefit of society, not for limited private and personal gain

- Legislation to dismantle and prevent media monopolies (for example, antitrust laws), so the power to create information and knowledge is not held by a powerful minority

- Greater protection and facilitation of high quality independent journalism

- The formation of independent oversight bodies (or something similar to suit the political and media ecosystems of different countries), separate from both the state and private interests, to monitor, call out and address disinformation

- The EU to stand by its commitment to free press, prioritising it as a central requirement to EU membership for both existing and candidate members

2. Social Media

The advent of social media and algorithmically-driven news feeds have provided new and powerful ways of disseminating disinformation, in a targeted fashion, to enormous audiences, at once-inconceivable speeds. As a consequence, disinformation has overwhelmed and infiltrated our lives, sowing distrust, undermining democracy and threatening the health of our planet.

FYEG calls for:

- Action to restrict social media companies' use of algorithms that prioritise engagement over content veracity and quality

- Recognition of the damage caused and dangers posed to democracy by analytics services that run social media disinformation campaigns for clients

- Collaboration with social media companies and governments to end social media disinformation campaigns, both by analytics companies and state actors

- Recognition of the potential for disinformation posed by developments in large language model artificial intelligence, and advocate for the pace of progress in this field to be consistent with safeguarding the ethical implications inherent within it

3. Fostering a society with greater resilience to disinformation

Increased uncertainty, such as housing insecurity, the cost of living crisis and the climate emergency, and decreased trust in institutions, fostered by structural oppression and negligent governance, makes people more susceptible to the easy answers provided by disinformation. Tackling disinformation is a social issue; disinformation-resilient societies require trust to be restored in the social contract.

FYEG calls for:

- Recognition that resilience to disinformation is a social issue, it is not the responsibility of individuals alone to inoculate themselves against disinformation

- Efforts to be taken to reduce uncertainty and insecurity in citizen’s lives to be part of disinformation interventions

- Efforts to be taken to build and maintain a genuine basis for trust between individuals and the social institutions that govern and influence their lives to be part of disinformation interventions

- Recognition that marginalised groups are both more often the targets of disinformation and more vulnerable to the effects of disinformation, and for addressing marginalisation and seeking the active participation of marginalised groups to be part of any disinformation interventions

- The development of media literacy education to increase understanding of what disinformation is, how it is spread, how to spot it, and how to talk about it with others, with a particular focus on social media