Topic: Addressing the online spread of misinformation and disinformation in the European Union

Executive Summary:

This Task Force project tackles the issue of how online disinformation (deliberate spreading of debunkable messages that create harmful social impacts like inducing mass panic) and misinformation (unintentional transmission of demonstrably false statements) is becoming more commonplace within the EU. The EC recognises such developments as threats to the regional bloc’s democratic principles, which value truthful narratives and accurate facts in collective decision-making processes and social debates.

The EC has launched several comprehensive region-wide initiatives, including implementing legally binding frameworks like the Digital Services Act, which entailed measures like penalising individuals who endorsed malicious foreign interference during periods of political turmoil like elections, where misleading messages become rife amidst hysteria. However, these top-down schemes can be counterbalanced by bottom-up arrangements where various socio-political actors could play meaningful roles in tackling this policy issue instead of solely relying on legislation-based responses which risk sacrificing freedom of expression.

Such alternative strategies to tackle disinformation and misinformation are practised by individual EU countries like Finland, but also found elsewhere in Canada and Taiwan, which experienced similar infodemics online. All three countries are identified as successful exemplary models for multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approaches, involving diverse socio-political agents beyond state governments, with such models being plausibly scaled up to create a regional regime to be overseen by the EC. Through our comparative case-study analysis, we identified best practices across these socio-political environments and justified why they would be effective when emulated within the EU’s democratic context.

Our policy recommendations appeal for the EC to facilitate actionable plans to be carried out by three main social groups. These are technological corporations, who can change the terms of use policies of platforms where falsehoods thrive; civil society organisations, who could diligently utilise their diverse expertise like big data analytics to debunk false claims; and EU member-state governments, who possess enforcement powers to implement mandatory digital literacy programmes. Additionally, the EC itself should become a major player in rallying international support by spearheading an EU-wide coalition, coordinating tangible civil, corporate, and country-led efforts to create response mechanisms that are willing and able to combat these evolving challenges efficiently.

We acknowledge that our proposed schemes have limitations, but if our proposed actions are implemented simultaneously, the EU stands to benefit from this newfound multi-pronged approach by fostering a culture of cooperation across various sectors to safeguard democratic values and institutions from the communal dangers posed by the rampant spread of disinformation and misinformation.