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Subject: From tackling disinformation to rebuilding EU citizens' trust in the media
- *Policy debate*
(*Public debate in accordance with Article 8 (2) of the Council's Rules of Procedure*)
[proposed by the Presidency]

Following consultation of the Audiovisual Working Party, the Presidency has prepared the attached discussion paper, which is submitted as the basis for the policy debate to take place at the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council meeting on 22 - 23 May 2019.

From tackling disinformation to rebuilding EU citizens' trust in the media

Presidency discussion paper

The fight against disinformation is an important priority of the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union. It is a theme which has been addressed in several Council formations (General Affairs Council, Foreign Affairs Council, Justice and Home Affairs Council) with the aim of identifying an urgent and coordinated response to newly emerged challenges, especially in the context of the European elections, which have brought to the fore the need to secure the integrity of the EU's democratic processes and values.

The Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council has a key role to play, not only in finding solutions to tackle disinformation from an audiovisual perspective, but also in ensuring quality audiovisual media services and access to pluralistic and reliable information for EU citizens in order to rebuild their trust in the media. This Council formation is therefore in a position to provide important input to the preparation of the report on the lessons learnt on disinformation that is to be drafted by the Presidency, in cooperation with the Commission and the High Representative, in view of the meeting of the European Council in June.

At their meeting on 27 November 2018, during the previous Austrian Presidency, Audiovisual Ministers had a first opportunity to hold a debate on tackling the spread of disinformation online. Since then, important steps have been taken at EU level.

In response to the call launched by the European Council Conclusions of 28 June 2018, inviting the Commission and the High Representative to present specific proposals for a coordinated approach by the EU institutions and the Member States, a Joint Communication on an *Action Plan against disinformation* was published in December 2018, setting out key actions for tackling disinformation, structured around four pillars: improving detection and analysis; strengthening coordinated and joint responses; mobilising the private sector, namely online platforms and industry; and raising awareness and improving societal resilience.

At this moment, with the EYCS Council coinciding with the very first day of the European elections, it is important to take stock of the results achieved and at the same time to identify possible courses of action to be taken in the future.

- The mobilisation of industry is vital for swift and efficient solutions to tackle disinformation. The first reports submitted by the signatories of the Code of Practice on Disinformation (Google, Facebook, Twitter) show that progress has been made. According to the Commission, demonetisation of purveyors of disinformation, fighting against malicious bots, labelling political advertisements and carrying out initiatives to promote media literacy are significant steps forward by these companies, but further efforts are still needed on several fronts, such as sharing of methodology and data sets for fake accounts, which would enable third-party experts and fact-checkers to perform independent evaluations.

In its Conclusions adopted on 21 and 22 March 2019, the European Council also urged online platforms and social networks to fully implement the Code of Practice and ensure higher standards of responsibility and transparency.

As a next step, by the end of 2019, the Commission, with the help of the European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services (ERGA), will carry out a comprehensive assessment at the end of the Code's initial 12-month period. This may result in further actions being proposed, some of which could be of a regulatory nature.

- Academic researchers and independent fact-checkers play a key role not only from an awareness-raising perspective but also in terms of gaining a better understanding of the mechanisms that sustain disinformation. The European network of fact-checkers, foreseen both by the Commission Communication on tackling online disinformation and the Action Plan against disinformation, is in the process of being set up.

As a first step, SOMA (the Social Observatory for Disinformation and Social Media Analysis) has been launched in cooperation with other research and development projects (Eunomia, SocialTruth, Provenance and WeVerify). The observatory supports fact-checkers in their work against disinformation, by providing them with a useful infrastructure and connecting them together so as to collaborate on specific tasks. SOMA will also prototype the concept of national centres for research on disinformation, which should link multidisciplinary efforts together at national level, in particular fact-checking and academic research about the disinformation phenomenon.

The second step is to deploy a secure online European platform on disinformation. Such a platform will connect national multidisciplinary teams and offer cross-border data collection, analysis tools and access to EU-wide data. Initial funding of EUR 2.5 million is foreseen for this online platform under the *Connecting Europe Facility* instrument (CEF), with a call to be launched by September 2019. Member States will be invited to support the establishment of such national multidisciplinary teams, which will provide specific knowledge about local information environments. It is therefore important to test the level of commitment of the Member States and their willingness to contribute to this project, which will create an independent European community able to tackle the online disinformation phenomenon.

- Another important element at EU level is the strengthening of media literacy skills, which are essential to empowering citizens and enabling them to make informed decisions in the digital age, thus contributing to the proper functioning of a democratic society.

The revised *Audiovisual Media Services* Directive is an essential milestone in this respect. For the first time, it includes an obligation for Member States to promote and take measures for the development of media literacy skills. Furthermore, in light of the central role played by video-sharing platforms in giving access to audiovisual content, the new Directive also obliges such platforms to provide for effective media literacy measures and tools and to raise users' awareness of those measures and tools. Member States have until 19 September 2020 to communicate the measures taken to transpose the Directive into their national legislation.

The Contact Committee plays an important role in the implementation of the Directive and will be consulted on the guidelines on the scope of media literacy reports by Member States to the Commission. The Media Literacy Expert Group has also a significant role to play in discovering, documenting and extending best practices in the field of media literacy, exploring synergies between different EU policies and media literacy initiatives, and providing advice and coordinating initiatives in response to the challenges raised by disinformation online.

It is important to examine how the Commission can further help with the implementation process as well as with the continuation of European initiatives such as the European Media Literacy Week, whose first edition in March this year was an unquestionable success.

- Quality journalism, media freedom and pluralism remain the cornerstones of today's European audiovisual landscape. Specific resources were included in the Commission's proposals for *Creative Europe* and *Horizon Europe* programmes under the next Multiannual Financial Framework (2021-2027). These are meant to support new tools for combating online disinformation and understanding the role of journalistic standards and user-generated content, as well as to foster quality journalism, media freedom, pluralism and media literacy. At the same time, the European Commission and the European Parliament also support independent projects in the field of media freedom and pluralism.

In the light of the above, Ministers are kindly invited to consider the following questions:

1. On the very first day of the European elections, how do Ministers assess the actions carried out so far at EU level to tackle disinformation and ensure quality and pluralistic media, in the interest of the EU citizens?
2. How should the coordinated approach among Member States and the European institutions be stepped up in order to tackle current challenges? Should the European audiovisual and media policy be strengthened and, if so, what should it focus on in order to rebuild EU citizens' trust in the media?

In order to give everyone the opportunity to take the floor within the available time, the Presidency invites participants to limit their interventions to a maximum of three minutes.