

ANALYSIS:

Digital disinformation: Policing online propaganda

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With the Russian invasion of Ukraine once again highlighting the key role that social media and digital communications play in international state actions and legitimacy, Policing Insight’s Andrew Staniforth looks at a new European research project on the impact of online networks on politics and democracy, which could have significant implications for policing and the rule of law.

Social media and other internet-based platforms are now intertwined with political life. They play an important role in allowing people to design, consume and share political news, seek political information and discuss, make decisions, donate money, or engage with political parties and other organisations.

“Social platforms and new media are increasingly perceived as conducive to the creation of ideological ‘echo-chambers’ eroding the space for public dialogue.”

Furthermore, these media platforms are supposed to open new avenues to political engagement and democratic participation.

However, developments in the recent past have created anxieties about their capacity to protect citizens from disinformation and to serve as balanced and open public fora for democratic debates.

Social platforms and new media are increasingly perceived as conducive to the creation of ideological ‘echo-chambers’ eroding the space for public dialogue.

They are increasingly being seen as fostering polarisation, radicalisation, depoliticization, spreading misinformation, fake news and are subject to manipulation. At the same time, they have been used in attempts to covertly influence the political choices of citizens, thus sapping their democratic credentials.

We also see with chilling effect, the state use of digital [propaganda to promote President Putin’s](#) reasoning for the invasion of Ukraine, resulting in unprecedented action by the [British Government](#) to curb the promotion of falsehoods on news and social media platforms related to the war in Ukraine.

Effective policing

Earlier this year, the [European Commission](#), in terms of state legitimacy, revealed that there were signs of a potential shift from governance based on expertise, multilateralism and consensual policymaking, towards majoritarianism, unilateralism, nationalism, populism and polarisation. At the same time, the Commission acknowledged there was a global decline in levels of trust in the political institutions of democracy.

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Recognising this challenge, the European Commission believes that research of the past and present challenges and tensions in democracy can help to better understand and strengthen democracy, its resilience and stability in the future.

It argues that findings from such research can foster democracy’s further development with a view to enhancing representation, participation, openness, pluralism, tolerance, the effectiveness of public policy, non-discrimination, civic engagement, the protection of fundamental rights and the rule of law in which effective policing can be delivered.

To fuel research, the [Research Executive Agency](#) of the European Commission has made a budget of €9million available for proposals addressing [politics and the impact of online social networks and new media](#).

This call, which opened in January and closes on 20 April, will be of direct interest to democratically elected regional majors, as well as police, crime and fire commissioners and other related public authorities across the UK, who remain eligible to apply for the innovation and transformation funding.

Under this topic, new proposals should set out a credible pathway to contribute to democratic governance by reinvigorating and improving the accountability, transparency, effectiveness and trustworthiness of rule-of-law based institutions and policies, and through the expansion of active and inclusive citizenship empowered by the safeguarding of fundamental rights.

Positive outcomes

The aim of this new call is to develop evidence-based innovations, policies and policy recommendations, as well as institutional frameworks that expand political participation, social dialogue, civic engagement, gender equality and inclusiveness.

“Successful proposals will serve to improve trust in democratic institutions such as mayoral offices with responsibility for policing, safeguarding liberties and the rule of law and protecting democracy from multi-dimensional threats.”

Activities of successful proposals will also contribute to enhancing the transparency, effectiveness, accountability and legitimacy of public policymaking. They will also serve to help improve trust in democratic institutions such as mayoral offices with responsibility for policing, safeguarding liberties and the rule of law and protecting democracy from multi-dimensional threats.

The expected outcomes of the successful projects will understand the changes wrought on democratic processes by new technologies, produce evidence-based recommendations to address the opportunities and challenges for political behaviour and democratic engagement presented by social platforms and new media, and enhance capacities for digital citizenship.

Proposals should investigate how audiences of different ages, genders and socio-economic and ethno-linguistic groups receive and assess information on digital platforms, and how political actors use these platforms to shape political behaviour. The results of this research will be of great value for policing and the wider criminal justice system.

Project concepts are also encouraged to propose and design regulatory innovations in response to the covert use of social platforms for political goals. Evidence-based approaches and methods for enhancing capacities for digital citizenship, including

media education, media competences, and digital literacy, should also be developed in the new proposals.

European democracy

The EU's framework programmes for research and innovation have devoted significant investments towards the study of democracy, but the invasion of Ukraine provides further evidence that democracies are more fragile and more vulnerable than ever before. Online propaganda, fake news and disinformation at state level continues to play an integral role in promoting falsehoods for political gain.

“The ability to prevent and protect the public from digital disinformation, fake news, and propaganda is fast becoming essential to preserve democracy for all communities.”

Freedom House, the oldest American organisation devoted to the support and defence of democracy around the world, revealed in its Freedom in the World 2020 Report – A Leaders Struggle for Democracy that: “Democracy and pluralism are under assault. Dictators are toiling to stamp out the last vestiges of domestic dissent and spread their harmful influence to new corners of the world.”

Formed in 1941 to promote American involvement in World War II, Freedom House continues to assess the fragility of democracy nations across the world, concluding in its 2020 report that: “The unchecked brutality of autocratic regimes and the ethical decay of democratic powers are combining to make the world increasingly hostile to fresh demands for better governance.”

Freedom flourishes in democratic nations where governments are accountable to their people; the rule of law prevails; and freedoms of expression, association, and belief, as well as respect for the rights of everyone, are guaranteed.

That being said, the ability to prevent and protect the public from digital disinformation, fake news and propaganda is fast becoming essential to preserve democracy for all communities.

Link to online article at Policing Insight: <https://policinginsight.com/features/innovation/digital-disinformation-policing-online-propaganda/>



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