Countering social media disinformation

While providing the unprecedented ability to quickly share information globally, social media also damages trust through the spread of misinformation. To counter this, SOMA created a community tasked with restoring that trust, with access to specialist tools for the job.

The phenomenal global growth of social media over the last decade or so, has incurred an explosion of misleading, factually inaccurate or even fake information. The speed with which this spreads, alongside social media’s open access content production and dissemination, increases the potential damage. Studies have shown that the propagation of disinformation is faster and has greater reach than accurate information.

The damage of disinformation ranges from personal or brand defamation, to political interference – for example in elections – which threatens democracy. The overall impact is the erosion of trust across societies.

The EU-funded SOMA project set out to increase awareness among key stakeholders about social media trends and topics of concern, while providing tools...
It takes a community

To share knowledge about the impacts of disinformation on opinions, culture, policy and profits, SOMA’s community of organisations gathered under the European observatory against disinformation. This provided a common working environment through a collaborative verification platform.

A key part of the community’s work was to conduct investigations into instances of disinformation, involving fact-checking by the project partners. Some 50 investigations were completed during the project, all publicly.

One of the most recent investigations looked specifically at the dubious information circulated online about the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine.

The investigation found that, despite its temporary suspension by some European governments on safety grounds being revoked, still ‘many news media used alarmist and sensationalist tones in covering the issue, paving the way for hoaxes and disinformation.’

This trend was identified despite the vaccine being approved by both the European Medicines Agency and the World Health Organization.

The collaborative verification platform – based on Truly Media, developed by ATC and Deutsche Welle – also links to other verification tools such as TruthNest. Users can easily approach sources such as the European Parliament, European Commission and Eurostat to request official positions on specific issues.

SOMA also researched existing methodologies to assess news sources, identifying 12 indicators to create the SOMA Transparency Index. These indicators were grouped under six dimensions related to the transparency and trustworthiness of news outlets: headline, author, sources, contents, wording and advertisement.

To further raise awareness, the team organised media literacy and information events, attended by 3 700 people in total.

In order to inform policy, a white paper was published and included
recommendations to increase the sharing of trustworthy content and an outline of the obligations major platforms should adhere to.

**Scaling up with the European Digital Media Observatory**

The SOMA platform’s 110 users include researchers and fact-checkers alongside members of both governments and the media.

“While the investigations and tools are important, our greatest success was the EU-wide community itself who collaborated using our tools to regain the trust of society by acting as a hub for trustworthy information,” adds Sarris.

Most of SOMA’s partners are now part of the EU initiative, the [European Digital Media Observatory](#) which, with more resources, is scaling up by introducing national hubs to form a pan-European network.

**Keywords**

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