



EuroPCom Report: Opening session

Disinformation and influences of technology on democracy. What can we as communicators do to support democracy?

26 June 2023, 14:00-15:30

Welcoming remarks:

5 min welcome remarks by **Othmar Karas**, *Vice-President of the European Parliament*

Vice-President Karas emphasised how communicating our common vision of the European idea was the main goal for all of us. The main objective was to involve all citizens from the north to the south, from the very young to the elderly. He also stressed that public communication strengthened parliamentary democracy, created confidence in citizens and made us more aware. Journalists and communicators must pursue transparent information and their role was indispensable, especially in light of the European elections in 2024. He highlighted how current political developments put democracy at risk, and misinformation, disinformation and hate speech were dangerous weapons. For these reasons he called for support from media to develop a common European response in order to ensure EU elections were a victory for European society.

5 min welcome remarks (video message) by **Vasco Alves Cordeiro**, *President of the European Committee of the Regions*

The President joined us live from the Azores, stating how important events like EuroPCom were in view of the 2024 European elections and how important it was to listen to all citizens' stories, especially at the local level. Diversity must be communicated and disinformation combated. The more informed citizens of the EU were, the more involved they would be. He called for debates to take place both at national and local level in order to promote what the EU was doing on the ground. He also stressed the key role that the CoR played in mobilising local and regional authorities together with the network of regional and local EU councillors and young elected politicians to inform European citizens as much as possible and invigorate the European project.

Speakers:

- Flora Rebello Arduini, *Campaigns Director, Ekō*
- Jonathan Lundberg, *Journalist and author specialising in the digitally driven culture wars*
- Anna Słojewska, *Coordinator and EU Correspondent for Rzeczpospolita, Lie Detectors*
- Dmytro Bilash, *Founder, Osavul*
- Delphine Colard, *Deputy spokesperson, European Parliament*

Moderator: Anna Gumbau, *Freelance energy and climate journalist and event moderator at Moderating.eu*

A takeaway from the session

The 2024 European elections are threatened by disinformation and misinformation. In order to protect European society and democratic institutions, EU, national and regional law makers, local and regional authorities, communicators and organisations dealing with AI and new technologies must work together to curb and mitigate disinformation. EU citizens have to be provided with reliable information and be empowered with the right tools to navigate the information ecosystem.

Summary of the session

For the opening session of the conference, experts from different backgrounds came together to hold discussions with the EuroPCOM community about disinformation and the influences of technology on democracy.

Flora Rebello Arduini explained how fake news worked and how well-structured and funded campaigns played into the hands of the people who promoted it. Disinformation eroded citizens' trust in democratic institutions. She highlighted the disinformation campaigns surrounding covid vaccines and Bolsonaro's questioning of election results in Brazil. Ms Arduini emphasised the key role that civil society could play in countering disinformation "on social media platforms and harnessing the full potential of the Digital Services Act to curb and mitigate disinformation". It was necessary to empower citizens to navigate the information ecosystem and protect the security of citizens. Over 70 countries and two billion people would be called to vote next year: cooperation was key among the different actors.

Jonathan Lundberg drew attention to the importance of a historical perspective, saying that we were all social creatures and there have always been lies. Only now, with the advent of the internet, everything was becoming faster. The problems were not new, but they were expressed in new ways. However, the internet has also provided tools that help to verify and fact-check. He pointed out how marginalised groups were more affected by disinformation and practices must be found to communicate with them and win their trust. AI was a new technology with new challenges. We must be cautious, less alarmist and approach the issue with a balanced perspective.

Anna Słojewska outlined the Lie Detectors project, an independent organisation funded by American philanthropists. The project involved journalists visiting schools in order to share media literacy skills with students. They have so far visited 1300 classes in Belgium, Poland, Germany, Austria, Switzerland,

and Luxembourg. The intent was to provide tools to combat fake news, such as verifying authors and web pages, comparing with similar articles and sources, talking to family members and professors and using common sense. She highlighted the role of what she termed "the half-truth" in the fight against fake news.

Dmytro Bilash began by thanking Europe on behalf of Ukrainian people for the support provided in protecting democracy. He focused on developing AI-powered solutions to protect states, businesses and society from information threats. On the topic of how AI was applied in protecting our society, he said that countering disinformation with AI consisted of two parts: an analytical one and a responsive one that required human involvement. AI could help with news analysis and make the response to disinformation faster. Nowadays, communication was vital for any kind of security measure. Increasing the collaboration with and cooperation from Big Tech in order to create a more open market was vital to protect our society.

Quoting European Parliament President, Roberta Metsola, **Delphine Colard** said: "we face a toxic online battle of a scale that threatens the very basis of our free societies and our free elections". Democracy cannot be taken for granted. She pointed out that the EU has had a long-standing commitment to regulation, and she cited the Digital Services Act, the Media Freedom Act and the AI Act as examples. "We must unite with the common goal of defending people's freedom and making society more resilient to attacks by activating good practices".

Quotes

"The EuroPCom conference takes place at a very strategic moment: one year ahead of the 2024 European elections! We need to bring the citizens on board, communicate what we are doing at EU level, provide them with correct information. Information creates awareness. Without awareness there is no democracy!" – **Othmar Karas**

"The debate around the next European elections is likely to face the threat of disinformation. Local, regional, national and European debates will need to be shaped in a pluralistic and trustworthy way, protecting our democratic space from foreign interference and fake news. (...) Local and regional authorities are key not only to mobilise voters but also to raise awareness about what is at stake. CoR members, regional and local EU councillors and the young elected politicians are going to be active in supporting the EU elections campaign and spreading the word on the importance of participating." – **Vasco Alves Cordeiro**

"The role of civil society is key to push institutions to make sure that the EU Digital Services Act is implemented to curb and mitigate disinformation." – **Flora Rebello Arduini**

"It is easier to fact-check disinformation now than it was before. The problems we are facing are not new but they are expressing themselves in a different way. As journalists we are becoming better at fact-checking but people also need to become more experienced with it." – **Jonathan Lundberg**

"Nowadays everybody needs to acquire journalistic skills, as disinformation is everywhere. Students have to be provided with the right tools and packages to tackle disinformation." – **Anna Słojewska**

"How do we apply AI to protect our society? Countering disinformation with AI consists of two parts, one more analytical and another one focused on response. Nowadays the communication part is vital for any security policy! All wars are carried out through communication, this is what happened in Ukraine!" – **Dmytro Bilash**

"Democracy cannot be taken for granted anymore, something that we took for granted for many years! The cooperation among different actors such as EU, national and regional law makers, civil society and media is vital to respond and be proactive against disinformation." – **Delphine Colard**