

**International organizations against disinformation****Organizaciones internacionales contra la desinformación**

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**Abstract**

Disinformation and information manipulation have risen to become two of the main challenges facing the information society in which we live and posing a particularly big threat to the correct development of electoral processes. With this in mind, almost all the actors in the international community have centered their efforts on defining this phenomenon and on finding ways to deal with it. From the G7, to the European Union, as well as the UN and NATO; international organizations have made pioneering efforts in their fight against disinformation. The objective of our work is, first, to understand the disinformation phenomenon, define it and dissect it; and subsequently analyze the measures taken against it.

**Disinformation, NATO Stratcom, COM (2018)****Resumen**

La desinformación y la manipulación informativa se han vuelto dos de los principales desafíos que acucian a la sociedad de la información en la que vivimos, amenazando especialmente al correcto desarrollo de los procesos electorales. Con esto en mente, casi todos los actores de la comunidad internacional han centrado sus esfuerzos en definir este fenómeno y en buscar formas para enfrentarlo. Desde el G7, hasta la Unión Europea, pasando por la ONU y la OTAN; las organizaciones internacionales han llevado a cabo esfuerzos pioneros en su lucha contra la desinformación. El objetivo de nuestro trabajo es, primero, entender el fenómeno desinformativo, definirlo y diseccionarlo; para posteriormente analizar las medidas tomadas frente a este por dichas OOII.

**Desinformación, NATO Stratcom, COM (2018)**

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## Introduction

In the last few years, the shadow of disinformation has been endlessly stalking our daily lives, playing a role in almost all recent historical events. Whether we look at the american political landscape since the presidential elections of 2020, and the assault of the capitol building of the United States of America on 2021, or the almost infinite torrent of “fake news” that lurked in Facebook, Twitter (now X) or Instagram during the height of Covid-19; disinformation has grown to become a palpable problem. On this particular matter, the pandemic that crippled the world during 2020 and 2021 played a crucial role. Due to the endless number of hoaxes around the virus and the vaccines<sup>1</sup>, and the sudden appearance of miracle cures in almost all social media platforms, disinformation came under the spotlight of the general public and the different governments of the world. The torrent of disinformation was so immense in that epoch that the WHO coined the term “*infodemic*” to talk about the overabundance of information, and the efforts to spread erroneous information with the objective of hampering the response of the public health system<sup>2</sup>.

But beyond the pandemic, as new AI powered technologies like Chat GPT, or elevenlabs’ Generative Voice AI come into play, the threat that disinformation poses grows larger with each passing day. Accordingly, the concern behind this phenomena has only increased in recent years, specially during the different electoral periods (such was the case during the 2022 american Midterms or the spanish general election of 2023) After all, while it is true that democracies live thanks to these processes, it is no less true that “*democracies also die through voting*”<sup>3</sup>

With all this in mind, it's no surprise that both states and International Organizations (IIOO) have been on a constant search for the best way to counter this hybrid threat, or at the very least, to palliate the problems it entails. Within the papers of this article, we aim to shed some light to those efforts, particularly, to the ones done by IIOO such as the UN, the G7, NATO and the EU. But before that, we must answer one question, ¿*What is disinformation exactly?*

### *Disinformation and Information disorder*

As Sir Francis Bacon said in *Sacred Meditations* (1597): “*Knowledge is power*”; an idea that has echoed through the ages, and which it still holds true today. As such, despite the common belief that disinformation is a modern occurrence, this phenomenon has been with us for far longer. Nevertheless, its current conception can be traced back to World War II, being both used by the III Reich<sup>4</sup>, and the Soviet Unión on both sides of the war. On this matter, many believe that Iosif Stalin was the one who coined the term. Known firstly as *Dezinformatsiya* (дезинформация), the term adapted itself into english around the decade of the sixties, only to be later popularized in the eighties<sup>5</sup>.

However, the issue around disinformation isn’t related with its origin but with its definition. Understanding and differentiating what is disinformation from what it’s not, has been at the center of many doctrinal discussions, for the idea has been tangled and fused with other similar ones, such as *fake news*, propaganda, malinformation or misinformation; creating a complex amalgam of concepts. Many experts and IIOO have decided to tackled this interconnected web of ideas<sup>6</sup>, and the definitions and explanations given to each term vary greatly<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> RTVE (n.d) Coronavirus hoaxes: We check fake news on the Internet RTVE.es.

<sup>2</sup> WHO (2020, 23 September) Managing the COVID-19 infodemic: Promoting healthy behaviours and mitigating the harm from misinformation and disinformation

<sup>3</sup> Varela Hernández, A. (2022).Information manipulation: an old threat that requires a multilateral, balanced and innovative solution. Gladius et Scientia. Revista de Seguridad del CESEG.

<sup>4</sup> The Merriam-Webster Dictionary. (2022, November 21 ) *Disinformation*. Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, A. (2016, November 26 ). *Before ‘fake news,’ there was Soviet ‘disinformation’*. Washington Post.

<sup>6</sup> NATO (n.d.). *NATO’s approach to countering disinformation..*

<sup>7</sup> Guess, A. & Lyons, B. (2020) *Misinformation, Disinformation, and Online Propaganda.*

However, for clarity and in order to settle our work on a specific line of thought, we've decided to opt for the terminology used by the European Commission (Commission from now on) among other IIOO (UNESCO<sup>8</sup>)

The Commission follows a report made in 2018 by the name “*A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation*” a report directly influenced by another report done by Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan on 2017 “*Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making*” Both reports share the same basis and ideas, and they both put a lot of emphasis on separating the idea of “*Fake News*” from *disinformation*. This is because they consider the first term to be inadequate and dangerous, as it can be (and has been) used as a political weapon. Instead, the reports have decided to use another term: *Information disorder*.

The information disorder which we could define as the phenomenon which encompasses all types of exchange of false information and/or with the intention of causing harm, is composed of three fundamental ideas: malinformation (“Authentic” information, used to harm a person, organization or country), misinformation (False information, but the person who disseminated it believes it to be authentic) and disinformation (False information, disseminated by a person who knows that its content is false). These definitions provide us with a better understanding of the information disorder as a whole, nevertheless, the Commission, on the COM (2018) 236 decided to pinpoint more profusely the idea of disinformation, defining it as “*verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for profit or to deliberately deceive the public, and that may cause public harm*”<sup>9</sup>

### *IIOO against disinformation*

#### *The UN and G7*

As we can deduce, disinformation is not a problem that only pertains to developed countries. It is a worldwide issue that doesn't stop at frontiers and that has the capabilities to cause harm in almost all corners of the world.

Taking this into account, the UN has been at the center of many discussions on the matter, recognizing the threat that disinformation poses, and urging states to take appropriate steps to address its negative consequences on the Resolution 49/21 approved by the General Assembly on April 1, 2022.<sup>10</sup> This document however, is but a very recent example of the efforts led by different IIOO. Four years before the UN's resolution, the G7 created the *Rapid Response Mechanism* (RRM), an instrument with which the members of the G7, together with the EU, and with Australia, New Zealand, NATO, Sweden and the Netherlands playing the role of observers; have tried to reinforce their coordination and their capacity to identify and respond to all torrents of disinformation, through constant and *rapid* communications and alerts<sup>11</sup>.

As we can see, both the UN and the G7, as well as Mercosur and the African Union (among other IIOO), are aware of the challenges that disinformation carries. Nonetheless, in this field of work, the two organizations that excel the most are NATO and the EU, which we will proceed to analyze.

<sup>8</sup> Ireton, C. & Posetti, J. (2018) *Journalism, 'Fake News' & Disinformation Handbook for Journalism Education and Training*, UNESCO

<sup>9</sup> COM (2018) 236 *Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach*.

<sup>10</sup> General Assembly Resolution 49/21. (2022, April 1) “The role of States in the fight against the negative effects of disinformation on the enjoyment and effectiveness of human rights” A/HRC/RES/49/21

<sup>11</sup> G7 (2022) *G7 Rapid Response Mechanism Annual Report 2021*

*NATO's measures*

Ever since Crimea's annexation in 2014, NATO, as the defense organization it is, has cautiously kept an eye on this phenomenon and the different dangers it could bring to the democracies of its member states. And so, after various examples of disinformation campaigns aimed at disrupting multiple member states such as Germany<sup>12</sup>, in 2018 Nato declared disinformation and other information disorders as "*hybrid challenges*" that belong to the dangerous, unpredictable and fluid security ecosystem in which we live in<sup>13</sup>.

After such a declaration, the efforts of this international organization on its fight against disinformation became much more prominent. Thus, in a similar fashion to the G7, NATO considered that the best course of action would be to facilitate the creation of reliable and constant information channels, aimed at facilitating the identification and discreditation of any type of disinformation, and/or other types of information disorders; not only amongst member states, but also with the civil population (specially aimed at promoting awareness and a better understanding of NATO's activities and operations), and traditional media<sup>14</sup>.

These channels, coined under the name "*Stratcoms*" (*Strategic Communications*), have only been a first step however. The defense organization has not stopped there, but instead it has been trying to find new ways of fighting against this growing threat. As an example, I've personally had the opportunity to participate, along with two other colleagues from the University of Santiago de Compostela (and with the assistance at all times of Professor Jose Julio Fernandez Rodriguez and Anxo Varela Hernández) in a contest organized by NATO, and the University of William and Mary, where hundreds of students from all over the world tried to come up with ideas and policies aimed at reducing the impact that disinformation has on the civil population.

<sup>12</sup> Sevillano, E. G. (2021, March 12). Russian propaganda chooses Germany as its target El País.

<sup>13</sup> NATO (2018, July 11) *Brussels Summit Declaration*.

<sup>14</sup> NATO (n.d.) *About Strategic Communications*. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence

*UE's measures*

With all of the above seen, and although the North Atlantic organization has had the greatest amount of institutional activity aimed at alleviating the effects of disinformation campaigns, the European Union has been, from day one, one step ahead of other organizations. This proactivity is based on a wide variety of circumstances, but if we had to pinpoint a particular reason, it would be the fact that the member states of the union have been the target of many disinformation campaigns in the past years. With this idea in mind, it's no surprise that the efforts of the EU in this field have been constant and very varied, which in turn has also brought an immense number of regulations and measures into the table.

With that being said, we will only analyse those whose impact on the union has been more palpable, and more relevant.

*A. East Stratcom Task Force*

This Stratcom (2015), was the first response that the UE carried out to confront disinformation. More specifically, its objective was to have a better prediction and response system against the disinformation campaigns led by the Russian Federation. Its way of operating is very similar to that of NATO's Stratcom, as it seeks to increase the understanding and critical analysis of the population and make them more aware of the Kremlin's disinformation operations. Since its creation until 2019, this Stratcom and its work team have managed to detect and stop more than 12,000 attempts at pro-Russian information manipulation, which they have collected in their star project: EU vs Disinformation<sup>15</sup>

*B. COM (2018) 236*

Although the 2015 Stratcom was a pioneering effort in this field, the first *big* move in this fight against disinformation would come with the "*Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions; The fight against disinformation: a European approach*"; also known as COM (2018) 236.

<sup>15</sup> East Stratcom Task Force. *About Eu vs Disinformation*

In it, the Union predicted the incipient weakness in which it was going to find itself in the year 2019, since numerous elections were going to take place in several member countries, as well as in the European Parliament; directly admitted that “*The exposure of citizens to large-scale disinformation [...] represents a great challenge for Europe*”, reiterating that “*Disinformation [...] harms our democracies by hindering the ability of citizens to make informed decisions [...] undermines freedom of expression [...] as well as the right of citizens to express their opinion and to receive and transmit information and ideas*”<sup>16</sup>

Given what we have seen, it is no surprise that in the aforementioned Communication, the Commission called for a greater participation of its member States, considering them as the main combatants in this hybrid warfare, leaving aside companies like X, Facebook, Instagram, etc; although the COM also urged these companies to up their involvement in this matters, paving the way for the creation of the future Code of Good Practice of the Union. On another note, the COM also tried to put together a series of legislative proposals and suggestions directed to its member states. In this sense, the COM encouraged member states to, on the one hand, increase the resilience of their citizens to disinformation campaigns, focusing especially on reinforcing the digital and media education of the younger generations; and on the other hand, requesting greater support for “quality journalism”.

### C. *Action Plan Against Disinformation and the Rapid Alert System*

After the COM, the next step in this open war against information disorders materialised in December 2018 with the APD “*Action Plan Against Disinformation*”. In it, the EU repeated many of the proposals and objectives that were already included in the COM, but unlike the previous one, in which guidelines were introduced, essentially aimed at the Member States; the APD fully involved the European organisation in the fight, determining the actions that it would take in this fight. Among the most important we can highlight:

1. Strengthening the Stratcom and all Union Delegations through an increase in personnel, as well as delivering and developing new tools aimed at detecting, analysing and uncovering disinformation activities.
2. Reinforcing the Code of Good Practices, introduced after the COM, by maintaining a constant and continuous monitoring of its implementation. The plan even allowed, if necessary to ensure correct electoral functioning, to “*promote rapid and effective compliance*”<sup>17</sup>; and in the event that its implementation is unsatisfactory, the Commission could also propose regulatory actions to alleviate it.
3. Another measure of particular importance is that the ADP asked the Member States, in cooperation with the Commission, to support the creation of multidisciplinary teams of researchers and independent “*fact-checkers*” to detect and uncover disinformation campaigns that occur through RRSS and other digital media.

<sup>16</sup> European Commission. (2018, 26 abril) Communication from the commission to the european parliament, the council, the european economic and social committee and the committee of the regions. Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach; COM(2018) 236

<sup>17</sup> European Commission. (2018). Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions; Action Plan Against Disinformation. JOIN(2018) 36 final

And finally, said Action Plan against Disinformation was also the genesis of the *Rapid Alert System* (RAS); an instrument, common to the entire European community, created with the aim of reporting, in real time, all the disinformation campaigns that said system detected. Its main rationale is that, according to the EU itself, “*The first hours after disinformation is released are critical to detect, analyze and respond to it*” The creation of the RAS meant that each member state was obliged to designate a connection point within their strategic communication departments. This connection point would notify about the alerts given by the system and would ensure that there was coordination between the relevant national authorities, as well as with the Commission and the European External Action Service.

*D. The most recent efforts of the Union (INGE, EDAP and DSA)*

All the measures that we have seen so far belong to what we could call the “*First Wave of EU Measures*”, since all of these were carried out with the aim of shielding the 2019 electoral processes against any type of disinformation campaign.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent torrents of disinformation that occurred with its arrival showed that there was still work to be done in this field, and that the threat of disinformation was much greater than had been anticipated. Thus, we can safely say that the measures that came after the pandemic belong to a “*Second Wave of EU Measures*”

This new *creative wave* took its first form with the creation of the *Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation* (INGE)<sup>18</sup>, in June 2020. As its name indicates and as stated in the decision of the European Parliament that established this commission, “*the objective of the commission [...] must be to offer a common, holistic and long-term approach to addressing evidence of interference foreign interference in the democratic institutions and processes of the Union and its Member States*”, since “*all reported incidents of foreign interference in democratic institutions and processes follow a systematic pattern that has been recurrent in recent years*”

The most relevant factor when talking about the INGE commission is that in the pursuit of its objectives it is much more invasive than any other measure developed by the EU, acting more as a deterrent. Thus, INGE's functions range from acts of an inquisitorial nature, analyzing whether fundamental electoral rules have been breached or evaded (especially rules against illegal financing); defining the possible areas that require legislative actions or even reviewing social media algorithms to ensure that these are as transparent as possible regarding the factors that lead them to display, prioritize, share, decategorize and delete content.

The next step for the EU would be taken with the “*Action Plan for European Democracy*” (EDAP), the spiritual successor to the Action Plan against Disinformation. The EDAP (2020), much like its predecessor, was developed under the concern that the European elections would be, yet again, affected by external interference.

<sup>18</sup> European Parliament. (2022, March 9) Foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union.

Similarly, to INGE, these fears lead to a more inquisitive approach, encouraging a more prominent participation by the citizens in the electoral processes<sup>19</sup> and reinforcing the freedom and pluralism of the media, whom the EDAP considered to be fundamental to “*hold decision-makers accountable and to help citizens make informed decisions*”<sup>20</sup>

And, to finish this section, it is worth mentioning one of the most recent efforts of the EU in the fight against disinformation: “The Digital Services Act” (DSA). Unlike the EDAP or the INGE, this regulation takes a different route, putting the main social media platforms (Facebook, X, Youtube...) under the spotlight<sup>21</sup>. The regulation, which will officially come into force in February 2024 (a few months before the European elections), has two objectives: first, to increase the transparency of the activities of the named platforms, forcing them to show the inner-workings behind their algorithms; and second, making said companies take responsibility for the damages that their services may cause to society.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusions

It's no mystery that with each passing day, our world gets smaller and smaller. Forty years ago, the time it would take you to go from the city of Santiago de Compostela to the city of Madrid could be a trip of almost 24 hours; today, a little over three. Similarly, forty years ago the simple idea of sending a message by letter from Spain to the United States could involve months; today, if you opt for other messaging services, it can be mere milliseconds.

All of these new means of transportation, as well as the Internet and globalization have made this immense world in which we live become something far more navigable, and it has also allowed information to be transmitted at speeds that years ago would have seemed absurd and impossible. This greater connectivity, however, has been accompanied by an important rediscovery: the true power that information holds.

Human beings are social creatures. We walk, breathe and live in community with other people in almost every moment of our days. And, as social creatures, we talk, we tell jokes, and, essentially, we communicate with each other. From the smallest minutiae to the most important issues, dialoguing and transmitting information is in our nature, just as much as telling lies and half-truths. We had already stated at the beginning of our work that the concept of disinformation is not an invention of the last 15 years, but if we were to be picky we would not put its origins in the Soviet *Dezinformatsiya* either. Manipulating information as well as the idea of disinformation, are both concepts that have been with us since the wheel was invented. It's only thanks to our current technology that their disruptive capabilities have only become more prominent.

With these ideas in mind, many IIOO realised the many dangers that disinformation poses, and how it could be used as a weapon to destabilize democracies all over the world. Their efforts have been commendable, and on the most part, they have been proven to be quite effective. Nevertheless, and as we have stated while discussing the European measures, the main combatants in this bout are not said organizations, but the states. If we really want to put a stop to the disease of disinformation as a whole, or at least repel some of its symptoms, the governments have to get involved. Some of them, have already taken the lead on this matter, either creating special agencies specialised in countering disinformation campaigns or passing very diverse laws and policies<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>19</sup>European Commission. (2020, December 3). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions; on the Action Plan for European Democracy. COM(2020) 790 final

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>21</sup> European Parliament (2022, March 10) Setting up a special committee on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation

<sup>22</sup> AlgorithmWatch (2022, September 21) *A guide to the Digital Services Act, the EU's new law to rein in Big Tech*.

<sup>23</sup> Bayer, J. (2021, October 13). Policies and measures to counter disinformation in Germany: the power of informational communities. Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Brussels office - European Union.

Important steps have been taken on this matter, and yet, we believe that those efforts should be pointed in a particular direction, still unexplored by most countries: *education*. A proper education, focused on the development of critical thinking and analysis is key. We live in a world in which information is becoming much easier to obtain, and we can obtain it from many different sources in a matter of seconds. The problem comes with determining which sources are reliable, and which are not; and for that we need to ensure that all those who consume information have the means to dissect it and understand it.

On this day an age, like Professor Jose Julio Fernández Rodríguez states “*To fight against disinformation we inevitably need to fight side by side with the citizenry*”<sup>24</sup>, and not just any citizenry, but one who is active and committed to the democratic order. We can try to detect disinformation campaigns in a matter of minutes, or ask social media operators to be more proactive against this problem; but, at the end of the day, communication requires at least two people for it to work, and if one of them just thinks: “*What if what they are telling me is not true?*”, this entire information disorder would be put in a check-mate.

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<sup>24</sup> Rodriguez, J. J. F. (2021). *Critical approach to information manipulation: the example of social networks*. *Gladius et Scientia*. Revista de Seguridad del CESEG.



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