

Young voices against disinformation

POLICY PAPER



What is disinformation and why is it relevant in the current digital era?

Disinformation can be defined as information that is false and **deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation, or country**. On the contrary, **fake news** are shared and widespread with **no intention to harm**, by actors who do not know that that information are false, did not verify the sources or have a bias towards them.

Disinformation is usually spread by both state and non-state actors or individuals who use sophisticated methods to disguise their identity making tracking their origin and responsibilities extremely challenging. Their aim is to strategically influence the public opinion or specific portion of the population to create or deepen contrasts and divisions between state actors, within countries, and among societies. An additional weaponization of disinformation occurs through election meddling practices, **with damaging effects on democratic processes**; while socially, disinformation contributes to the **polarization of the society** in enhancing in-group and out-group dynamics. Disinformation operations can result in influencing the behaviour of state and international actors.

A report by the Oxford Internet Institute, a research lab associated with the University of Oxford, found that organised disinformation campaigns took place on social media in 48 countries, a full 20 more than the 28 where these phenomena were observed in 2017. This is a clear sign that this phenomenon is expanding and that efforts to curb its spread are insufficient, or at least not effective.

Why it would be important to develop policies against disinformation and fake news with a special focus on young people?

Planned **disinformation is not a new phenomenon**, but the means used to achieve its strategically aims have changed: before disinformation could be spread by word of mouth or through the press, but now it profits from emerging communication technologies, mainstream media and a widespread global digital information.

In this context, **disinformation is to be considered even more of a threat for young generations**, which do not necessarily know how to navigate in the confusing universe of millions of news stories, distinguish true stories from fake ones and make sure they are not inadvertently contribute to further disseminating them. According to an EU survey, around 46% of European citizens get their information on world news precisely through social media without checking the veracity and reliability of the source. The very power of disinformation as a harmful tool is based on a lack of digital awareness and literacy affecting not just younger generations but also older ones.

However, **young people** are in fact not only more vulnerable to disinformation, but also **the most familiar with the latest technologies**. Therefore, providing digital literacy and guidance to younger generations would not only result in creating more digital awareness in a critical segment of our society but could also start a virtuous cycle with young people contributing to positively influence older generations making them more resilient to disinformation.

Therefore, we believe that **young people could be an asset for NATO in promoting fact-based and credible communication to contrast disinformation**. By putting in place tailored initiative to enhance their digital literacy, they could be empowered to start a real “digital literacy revolution” carrying it towards the older generations, perhaps more difficult to engage.

Policy proposals and recommendations

The production of disinformation and fake news is a global scourge. NATO and its member states should develop policies to combat it with a particular focus on young people. NATO could facilitate projects and initiatives aimed at raising awareness on the issues linked to disinformation and its possible repercussions to make new generations more resilient to the dangers that can be hidden on the web, to teach them to recognise false news from truthful news and above all to teach them how to stop the spread of disinformation.

In order to achieve this, we propose that:

- NATO and specifically the NATO Public Diplomacy Division (PDD) should focus on financing projects to increase media literacy in schools and universities.
- The Alliance could profit of its experience, knowledge, and best practices already in use in its member countries on this issue by creating a free and accessible platform for media literacy with useful materials for teachers and students containing effective methods to prevent and counter disinformation.
- NATO Public Diplomacy Division should focus on projects aimed at financing young activists who already started counter-disinformation and debunking activities on social media and other platforms, allowing them to increase the reach of their initiatives.
- NATO PDD could sponsor the creation of a NATO Disinformation Committee of the Youth where young people could provide their vision and recommendations to the Alliance on this topic.
- NATO PDD devise, with the help of national partner institutions active in this field, an international advertisement campaign targeting young people with fast and useful tips to recognize false information on the internet and social media.