

Parliament calls for action on fake news

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Opinion

However, some MEPs have warned against measures that may “restrict freedom of speech”.



Photo credit: Press Association

According to a recent Eurobarometer poll, 83 per cent of respondents said that fake news represents a danger to democracy, with 37 per cent saying they come across fake news almost every day. In January 2018, the European Commission set up a high-level group of experts to advise on policies and initiatives to counter the spread of disinformation and fake news.

Petra Kammerevert, Chair of Parliament’s culture committee, points out that propaganda and disinformation have been around for a long time. “It is now presented in a new form, as so-called ‘fake news’. This is a worrying trend we must now deal with.”

S&D group MEP Nicola Danti supports Kammerevert’s views, saying, “Fake news represents a real risk

to our democracies.”

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The Italian deputy says, “It is of utmost importance and urgency to work together at a EU level and define an effective and comprehensive strategy to tackle the spread of fake news.”

However, German EPP group deputy Andreas Schwab warns that “The challenge is finding the right balance between fighting against false information and disinformation online, and protecting the principle of free speech.”

Schwab, like Danti, wants to “address this issue on a European level, as fake news is not territorial and does not stop at country borders.”

ECR group deputy Dan Dalton also highlights that fake news is not a new phenomenon, but believes “social networks have extended its reach and potential to cause damage.”

Dalton, who sits on Parliament’s internal market and consumer protection committee, also warns that the EU, when developing any policies, “needs to be very careful to avoid restricting freedom of speech. One person’s fake news may be another person’s legitimate expression of opinion.”

He believes the key is finding the right balance “between discouraging deliberately false and inflammatory content and censorship. I do not think anyone yet knows how to do that.”

Greens/EFA group MEP Julia Reda also stresses the need to ensure “attempts to protect legitimate news don’t backfire and end up restricting access to it.”

She highlights two current EU policies being considered that could restrict access. “The planned ‘link tax’, intended to financially support publishers, would make matters worse by effectively putting a price tag on spreading real news.”

Reda believes that “limiting text and data mining of news content would undermine the development of potential innovative solutions such as algorithmic fact checking.”

Instead the German deputy calls for an “increase in direct public funding for investigating journalism. Following the scandal concerning Facebook and its links to Cambridge Analytica.

Reda says, “Regulating ad targeting could also have many benefits. We could prevent propaganda from targeted directly at those most susceptible to it, by helping to ensure that advertising revenue flows not only to those giant internet companies that are able to track our behaviour across the internet, but also to providers of content such as news, and protect our privacy at the same time.”

Kammerevert recognises the toxic atmosphere of political debate on social media. She warns that

when tackling fake news, it should be done without “overheating the discussion.”

About the author

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