

How to Work Together to Preserve Our Online Information Space?

**SUMMARY OF THE ROUND TABLE
ORGANISED BY THINK TANK RENAISSANCE
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The digital revolution is drastically impacting the way we access information. In addition to TV, radio, or the websites of news outlets, information is now widely accessed via social media platforms¹. It is also impacting the way information is produced and spread, as well as the relationship between the “producers” and the “consumers” of information. With the advent of platforms based on user-generated content, Internet users themselves have become producers and broadcasters of information, just like journalists, institutional players, researchers, etc. A whole range of actors are now involved in the production and spread of information. Due to the ability to easily “like” and share social media posts or news articles, we have also all become potential promoters of informational content, whether produced by professionals or amateurs.

As a result, cyberspace can be perceived as an essential lever of our democracies, guaranteeing greater freedom of expression and a wider access to information. But it can also be portrayed as a dangerous space,

¹ According to a study from the Jean-Jaurès Foundation and Conspiracy Watch conducted by the Ifop institute in 2019, while 36% of the French people who access information online do so on the websites of major media outlets, 33% do so via social media. See: « Les réseaux sociaux première source d'info en ligne chez les personnes sensibles aux théories du complot », *FranceInfo*, 18 February 2019: https://www.francetvinfo.fr/internet/reseaux-sociaux/info-franceinfo-les-reseaux-sociaux-premiere-source-d-info-en-ligne-chez-les-personnes-sensibles-aux-theories-du-complot_3191963.html

filled with hate speech, false information, conspiracy theories, scams and click bait. Although these practises are not new, they are given a new impetus online, especially since the advent of social media platforms. For the last five years, the fight against “information disorders”² has thus been gaining tremendous momentum in the public debate, both in France and abroad. From the spread of anti-Clinton propaganda by a wide range of Russian protagonists on social media during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections³, to the emergence of the QAnon movement, from the broadcasting of the French documentary *Hold Up*⁴ in November 2020, to President Donald Trump encouraging hate groups and political violence following Joe Biden’s victory⁵ in January 2021, a chain of events has gradually led governments, companies and civil society organisations to take action to protect and preserve the online information space. In this regard, the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic has proven to be a “textbook case”, with its load of conspiracy theories, anti-vax statements, wannabe epidemiology experts on social media, and even prominent heads of states tweeting hazardous advice⁶.

Preserving the online information space in the face of such developments requires first and foremost a clear understanding of the issue at stake. “Information disorders”, as coined by researchers Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, come in various forms which each call for different considerations and actions: dis-information (e.g. false connection, misleading content), mis-information (e.g. false context, imposter, manipulated or fabricated content) and mal-information (e.g. leaks, harassment, hate speech)⁷. While mis-information consists of false information that is spread regardless of the intent to mislead, dis-information consists in knowingly sharing mis-information.

2 The term was coined by researchers Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, who identify mis-, dis- and mal-information as the three elements of information disorders. See: Wardle, C. and Derakhshan, H. (2017), “Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making”, 109 pp.: <https://edoc.coe.int/fr/medias/7495-information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research-and-policy-making.html>

3 “Here’s What We Know So Far About Russia’s 2016 Meddling”, *Time*, 18 April 2019: <https://time.com/5565991/russia-influence-2016-election/>

4 This French documentary synthesises a large part of the conspiracy theories and false information circulating around the Covid-19 pandemic.

5 “Donald Trump is the accelerant”, *Vox*, 9 January 2021: <https://www.vox.com/21506029/trump-violence-tweets-racist-hate-speech>

6 “Trump’s Suggestion That Disinfectants Could Be Used to Treat Coronavirus Prompts Aggressive Pushback”, *The New York Times*, 24 April 2020: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/24/us/politics/trump-inject-disinfectant-bleach-coronavirus.html>

7 To learn more, see: Renaissance Numérique (2018), « Fake news ? Faire face aux troubles informationnels à l’ère numérique », 55 pp.: https://www.renaissancenumerique.org/system/attach_files/files/000/000/155/original/RN-NOTE_FAKE_NEWS_23mars2018.pdf?1521799239

Resisting this movement also requires shared efforts from all actors involved. Although technological tools, like content-filtering algorithms or flagging and reporting mechanisms, may have a role to play, their effectiveness remains limited⁸ and they only address part of the issue. Cyberspace gives the opportunity to anyone to produce and share information. Thus, all actors involved in producing and sharing this information, including the media, online platforms, private actors, intermediaries, public figures, governments, civil society and even citizens, have – to a greater or lesser extent – a responsibility in the preservation of this space. Although not all actors have the same degree of responsibility in this matter, the responsibility is indeed shared. Given the extent, the complexity and the perimeter of the issue at stake, isolated efforts won't do the trick. All actors must find ways of working together towards this common goal.

This was precisely the topic of the roundtable discussion organised by Renaissance Numérique as part of the conference “Covid-19 Mis/Disinformation: Addressing the Viral Challenge” hosted by the British Embassy in Paris on 17 November 2021. To address the practicalities of how we can work together to preserve our online information space, the think tank brought together **Mari Durban**, Head of Counter Disinformation Policy at the UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS), **Camille Grenier**, Operations Manager at the Forum on Information and Democracy, and **Rahaf Harfoush**, digital anthropologist and Member of the French Digital Council (*Conseil national du numérique*). The speakers addressed the confusion that is often made between “mis-information” and “dis-information” and the porosity between those terms, which makes it difficult to respond to these two distinct issues. To judge whether the actions currently undertaken by the various actors involved in the online information space are going in the right direction, they also came back on the main obstacles to tackling information disorders. Is it a lack of access to data? A lack of accountability of some actors? A lack of cooperation? A lack of tools? A lack of literacy? Something else? ... This paper summarises their exchanges.

⁸ To learn more, see: Renaissance Numérique (2020), “Moderating our (dis)content: Renewing the regulatory approach”, 57 pp.: https://www.renaissancenumerique.org/system/attach_files/files/000/000/279/original/RenaissanceNumerique_Note_ContentModeration.pdf?1613557339

1.

Information disorders: a non-homogeneous multi-factor phenomenon that requires thorough investigation

One aspect of the issue all three speakers agreed on is the fact that, prior to proposing ways to join forces in fighting information disorders, it is of utmost importance to understand what those are and how they work. Fighting dis-information, for instance, requires understanding why people engage in dis-information campaigns, how these are spread and how they go viral. As mentioned by **Rahaf Harfoush**, digital anthropologist and Member of the French Digital Council, there can be economic incentives to spread dis-information⁹. A recent report by the *Conseil national du numérique* indeed showed that no more than twelve persons were responsible for 65% of the false information spread on Twitter and Facebook about Covid-19 vaccines between February and March 2021, and that all of them had an economic incentive to spread this false information¹⁰.

Why people engage in information disorders depends on who they are and what their agenda is. In this regard, **Ms Harfoush** cited the example of the persons who are behind the QAnon movement, who do have an economic agenda, but also a political and social one. According to the expert, the incentive to deteriorate the quality of information online also varies depending on whether those responsible are Russian, Chinese, American, European, influencers, political leaders, etc.

Another key aspect put forward by the digital anthropologist and researcher is that dis-information is about people. It is built on communities that share a specific language, a special connection, a sense of belonging, which have a hierarchy, leaders, etc. It is also deeply embedded in a certain digital culture (that of memes, stories, TikTok, etc.). According

⁹ To learn more, see: *Conseil national du numérique* (2021), « Récits et contre-récits. Itinéraire des fausses informations en ligne », 91 pp.: https://cnnumerique.fr/files/uploads/2021/CNNum_Dossier-Recits-et-contre-recits-itineraire-des-fausses-informations-en-ligne.pdf

¹⁰ *Conseil national du numérique* (2022), « Civilisation Numérique. Ouvrons le débat ! », p. 56: https://cnnumerique.fr/files/uploads/2022/Civilisation_num%C3%A9rique.pdf

to **Rahaf Harfoush**, we have now gone beyond an oral community: “we are in a post-oral multimedia community” and understanding how dis-information works and spreads requires analysing those complex communities (e.g. Facebook groups, Discord servers, WhatsApp conversations) at the micro level, from within.

Finally, the expert underlined the central role of disenfranchisement in the spread of dis-information. “*There have always been conspiracy theories, but they tend to thrive in times of crises, lack of affordable housing, working opportunities, rising inequalities, etc. This is all reinforced by the technological revolution.*”, she noted.

2.

Why are information troubles so hard to address?

Still, making the effort of understanding the logic behind information troubles is but a key prerequisite to fighting them. Beyond the difficulty to come to grips with complex issues like mis-information, dis-information and mal-information, the panellists underlined several reasons why this phenomenon is so hard to address.

One of these reasons, put forward by **Rahaf Harfoush**, is that dis-information is sometimes spread by people, including political leaders and celebrities, that have a great influence among their communities. This is particularly problematic when those communities extend over millions of persons. “*How can we address the fact that some influencers like Cardi B¹¹ may tweet false information? Their influence is dramatically more important than that of “regular people”.*”, asked the digital anthropologist.

The second point raised by the speakers when discussing the difficulty of tackling information disorders is the fact that, like the communities

¹¹ Cardi B is an American singer and songwriter. She has 117 million followers on Instagram and 20,4 million followers on Twitter.

they are based on, these troubles are evolutive. In addition to the public and visible information space, they operate at the micro level, in private groups and conversations whose codes are constantly changing. It is thus becoming harder and harder for researchers to dive down into the meaning of these communities, as it takes more and more time to study them from the inside. As explained by **Rahaf Harfoush**: *“You only understand the language if you are part of the community.”* This is why, she noted, noticing early signals and fighting things like radicalisation requires studying those phenomena at the micro level. As underlined by **Mari Durban**, Head of Counter Disinformation Policy at the UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS), this evolutive aspect means that the answer to the problem must also be evolutive: *“The nature of the challenge is consistently evolving. And so our collective response must evolve as well”*, she stressed.

According to **Ms Durban**, this complexity is further reinforced by important evidence gaps. In her opinion, in order to fully grasp the extent of the phenomenon and to better understand the impact of the steps companies have taken to address harmful content on their platforms, companies should make some of their data available: *“It’s crucial that we have access to relevant data so we can build a coherent picture of the information environment”*, she noted. The UK government is currently working on ways to bridge this evidence gap through the development of a “Measuring Effective Interventions Framework” to build consensus on the best data for understanding the effect of changes to platform policies and interventions to address mis-information and dis-information.

The fourth reason put forward by the speakers that explains why fighting information disorders is so complex, is that we are facing a global issue. As underlined by the DCMS official, it is not an issue that can be tackled by a single government alone. It is a global problem that needs an international response. The other panellists also stressed this point, explaining that, as the Internet has no boundaries, information disorders very easily travel across borders.

3.

Fighting information disorders requires collective and multi-scale efforts

For all these reasons, preserving our online information space requires a collective and multi-scale response.

As underlined by all panellists, governments and public authorities in general have a major role to play in this effort. In this regard, **Mari Durban** mentioned various initiatives put forward by the UK government. In March 2020, a “Counter Disinformation Unit” (CDU) was set up within DCMS. The CDU is designed to be stood up in periods of acute dis-information risk and was previously stood up during the 2019 European Elections and UK general election. It brings together monitoring and analysis capabilities from across the UK government. Its primary function is to provide a comprehensive picture of the extent, scope and the reach of dis-information and to work with partners to ensure appropriate action is taken. **Ms Durban** explained that the UK government has developed the SHARE checklist – which aims to increase audience resilience by encouraging users to think critically about what they see online.¹² **Ms Durban** also emphasised the importance of regulation in this space. The UK government is taking steps in this direction, with DCMS leading the “Online Safety Bill”¹³, that aims to introduce a new duty of care which will give companies clear legal responsibilities to put in place systems and processes to improve user safety. As underlined by the DCMS official, under the new laws companies will be required to set out what content is and is not allowed on their services, and Of-com – the UK’s appointed regulator – will be able to take enforcement action if what is appearing on their platforms doesn’t match up with the promises they’ve made to their users.

¹² See the “Don’t feed the beast” video campaign here: <https://youtu.be/1oGOAOPBEv4>

¹³ This bill is currently being scrutinised by a joint committee of MPs and Lords. “Draft Online Safety Bill, Presented to Parliament by the Minister of State for Digital and Culture by Command of Her Majesty”, May 2021: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/985033/Draft_Online_Safety_Bill_Bookmarked.pdf

Still, fighting information disorders cannot be done by governments alone. A large consensus appeared among all three speakers around the need for relevant tech companies to be held accountable and to take action to preserve the online information space. **Mari Durban** explained that during the pandemic, it has been encouraging to see some of the steps platforms have taken which have been welcomed by the UK government. These include platforms expanding their mis- and dis-information policies, alongside fact checking and increased labelling of false and misleading content; and introducing new restrictions on advertising related to Covid-19 to prevent the sale of false cures and the promotion of anti-vaccination messaging. **Ms Durban** stressed however, that there is clearly more to do to ensure that their policies and enforcement are fit for purpose, whilst still respecting freedom of expression. In this regard, **Rahaf Harfoush** insisted on the necessity to regulate big platforms and more precisely to have a closer look at their funding ideologies which, in her opinion, have a big impact on competition in the information market.

As argued by **Camille Grenier**, Operations Manager at the Forum on Information and Democracy, civil society must also play its part. The first way this can be done, he suggested, is by contributing to raising awareness, which has been at the heart of Reporters Without Borders' (RSF) activities these last ten years¹⁴. Although the recent developments around leaked Facebook papers and the initiative of whistleblower Frances Haugen have made the headlines lately, the negative impact of these actors' business models on the information space have been known for many years now, he argued. What changes is that it had never been denounced at such a high level before. *"Putting pressure on the different actors to bring about change, including top level directors, might be the first thing we can do"*, he noted.

Besides raising awareness, **Mr Grenier** also stressed civil society's role in bringing decision makers up to speed on those issues. There is some lack of digital literacy amongst government representatives and elected officials, he stressed, especially when it comes to the online information space, which is both multidimensional and evolutive. His point: civil society organisations have expertise in this field, and can help build relevant regulations.

¹⁴ Prior to joining the Forum on Information and Democracy, Camille Grenier was the project manager of the International Initiative on Information and Democracy at Reporters Without Borders.

They can also contribute to providing solutions, a mission that RSF has been embracing for many years. In 2018, the NGO launched the “International Initiative on Information & Democracy”¹⁵, which aims at bringing democratic guarantees in the global information and communication space. *“Ensuring that people have a better access to reliable information will not be done only by fighting for press freedom and the safety of journalists. We also need to act on the very structure of the online information space.”*, argued **Camille Grenier**. As part of this international initiative, fundamental principles to guide the governance of the online information and communication space have been drawn up¹⁶, and several countries are now working on implementing them. The Forum on Information and Democracy¹⁷ has been tasked with transposing those key principles into national, regional and international regulatory frameworks, and ensuring their implementation. More recently, a working group on “infodemics”¹⁸, co-chaired by former MEP Mariete Schaake and 2021 Nobel Peace Prize recipient Maria Ressa, was set up in the framework of this Forum. The group has come up with recommendations on the need to focus on issues like transparency, privacy, the architecture of content moderation and of data collection, private messaging systems, etc. During the last edition of the Paris Peace Forum, the Forum on Information and Democracy unveiled the first names of the “prefiguration group” that will pave the way for the International Observatory on Information and Democracy.¹⁹ This group is co-chaired by former OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría and by Shoshana Zuboff, author of *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* and Harvard Business School Professor emeritus. The aim is to reproduce the logic of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)²⁰, but with regards to information and democracy.

Above all, what came out of the discussion is that preserving our online information space will require coordinated efforts and cooperation between all actors involved. In this regard, **Ms Durban** stressed the importance of collaboration between tech companies, governments

15 To learn more, see the “Information and democracy” page on RSF’s website: <https://rsf.org/en/information-and-democracy>

16 Those are: the right to information, freedom of expression, privacy, responsibility and transparency of powers. “International Declaration on Information and Democracy”, 5 november 2018: <https://rsf.org/en/declaration>

17 To learn more about the Forum, see: <https://informationdemocracy.org/forum/>

18 Forum on Information and Democracy, “Working group on infodemics”, Policy framework, November 2020: https://informationdemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ForumID_Report-on-infodemics_101120.pdf

19 “7 prominent figures join Angel Gurría, Shoshana Zuboff to create the International Observatory on Information and Democracy”, RSF, 13 November 2021: <https://rsf.org/en/news/8-prominent-figures-join-angel-gurría-shoshana-zuboff-create-international-observatory-information>

20 To learn more about the IPCC and its activities, see: <https://www.ipcc.ch/>

and academia. As an example, she cited the DCMS-led “Counter Disinformation Policy Forum”, which brought together representatives of social media companies, academics, fact-checkers and researchers with the aim of improving understanding of the information environment; developing and improving the responses to mis- and dis-information; and preparing for the future by developing better approaches and policy recommendations. The policy forum was a six-month pilot which concluded in June 2021. However, **Ms Durban** explained that DCMS regularly meets with major social media platforms bilaterally and at an Industry Group to further collective understanding of the issues and the steps being taken to address specific mis-information and dis-information threats to ensure this issue is tackled effectively. As part of the fight against the “infodemic” stemming from the Covid-19 pandemic, the UK government has also been working with online platforms to make sure that accurate information, produced by the National Health Service (NHS) appears at the top of search results, etc.

According to **Rahaf Harfoush**, who also agreed that cooperation between all actors of the chain is primordial, the problem needs above all to be tackled at the core. Since information troubles thrive on disenfranchisement and on a sense of community, we need to focus on fighting disenfranchisement and we need to do more research into the communities that create and spread those troubles.

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