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# Disinformation and infoxication, two «fake synonyms» in the context of the European Commission's information strategy

Desinformación e infoxicación, dos «falsos sinónimos» frente a la estrategia de información de la Comisión Europea

## ABSTRACT:

The 2008 financial crisis extended the use of the word infoxication in the wake of the intensive use of communication technologies. Two more terms burst onto the scene in 2016: post-truth and fake news. Four years later disinformation has played a supporting role in the COVID 19 pandemic and the ensuing socio-economic crisis. The European Union has flagged up disinformation as a real danger to democracy and has drawn up an action plan in response.

## KEY WORDS:

Disinformation; Infoxication; Fake news; European Union; Digital literacy; Information literacy.

## ABSTRACT:

La crisis financiera de 2008 extendió el uso del término infoxicación unido al uso intensivo de las tecnologías de la comunicación. En 2016 irrumpen con fuerza dos términos: posverdad y *fake news*. Han pasado cuatro años y la desinformación es protagonista secundario en la crisis sanitaria del Covid-19 y la crisis socioeconómica consiguiente. La Unión Europea identifica la desinformación como un verdadero peligro para las democracias y diseña un plan de acción.

## KEY WORDS:

Desinformación; Infoxicación; *Fake news*; Unión Europea; Alfabetización digital; Alfabetización informacional.

## 1. Introduction

The European Union champions freedom of expression as set forth in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and acts against disinformation, which it considers it to be an antidemocratic practice. Its action plan to combat this phenomenon (European Commission, 2018a) proposes a series of measures designed to combat the growing tide of disinformation and encourage information literacy.

## 2. Infocication as part of a disinformation ecosystem

The reaction to the condition known by the term of infocication<sup>1</sup> would appear to be disconnection. Infocication unquestionably occurs in a digital environment, hence most of the advice on how to avoid its effects —namely stress, fear, disinformation, dependence, among others— involves disconnecting for varying periods of time or establishing information goals focused on specific topics of interest. This is a difficult task in a social model that is aimed at prioritising the so-called «always on» society, and has little time to engage with the reasons for an infodiet or digital detox.

Difficult, but possible. One example of someone who has taken the decision to disconnect from a hyper-connected environment<sup>2</sup> is Mar Cabra, journalist and winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 2017 at the age of only 33. Mar Cabra admits to being a victim of so-called burnout syndrome —or occupational burnout syndrome— caused by endless days of teleworking and the intensive use of technology. This situation drove her to a state of hyper-connectedness and infocication and caused her to become a victim of the «attention economy: the economy whereby applications make money depending on the amount of time we spend on them» (Cabra, 2019). She is not alone: many people recommend disconnecting for a few hours or for one or several days.

Another dimension of infocication is the key role acquired by algorithms in the development of artificial intelligence, which are critical to decision-making. In this context, the recent creation of the Observatory of the Social and Ethical Impact of Artificial Intelligence (OdiseIA <https://www.odiseia.org>), on whose board of directors Mar Cabra sits, analyses this type of challenges from the standpoint of the humanities.

Infocication is in part a consequence of a lack of critical attention towards the environment and of excessive intellectual laziness. Nowadays, undertakings such as leisurely reading, critical interpretation or even summoning the necessary effort to understand a particular text are all incompatible with the speed required by the viral and instantaneous response

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1/ The term «infocication» does not appear in the dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy (RAE), although it is related with the entry for «intoxication». This is a neologism which, preferentially in a digital environment, denotes information overload and its negative effects.

2/ The term «hyper-connected» does not appear in the dictionary of the RAE, although it is related with the word «connect». The term refers to being connected to information through electronic media, particularly the Internet, and whose impact is now further magnified by the arrival of the Internet of things.



demanded by social media, the belief that it is vital to be multi-connected, and with what could be described as «the immensely global» nature of globalisation.

This all creates a perfect storm: added to an excess of information —impossible to assimilate at the cognitive level, but still with the capacity to influence on an emotional level (post-truth)—we also encounter news which, because it is false or has been manipulated (disinformation), bears little relation to reality, and yet implicitly suggests a degree of alarmism that appeals directly to our fear, an emotion that captures our attention and ensures that, without realising, we consume advertising *ad hoc*.

Plutchik's classification identifies eight emotions: joy, trust, fear, surprise, sadness, aversion, anger and anticipation; and there is a list of around 32,000 Twitter hashtags, each with associations to the same emotions. The emotions we express in response to falsehoods help us understand the factors (in addition to the «new content» effect) involved in the decision to share fake news. Although we cannot confirm that novelty triggers a retweet or that it is the only reason fake news is retweeted, it has been found that fake news commonly has a greater novelty value and that new information is more likely to be retweeted (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018).

Dramatization rides roughshod over the deliberately ambiguous language that is typically used in certain sectors; for example, in the political sphere of diplomacy, which is traditionally associated with the guardedness of its messaging, we see «constructive ambiguity chosen over precision, reason over passion and confidentiality over transparency» (Bjola, 2019). In social media, the politically correct is diluted in a digital space where data and algorithms speak their own language, where images and emotions are combined with cognitive references to produce semantic content, often governed by new rules. It is a language in which the emotional, visual, immediate and simple bid for attention is the key to ensuring that, as highlighted by Bjola, the digital contents of the social network platforms are tailored to these media and thus succeed in going viral.

Citizens feel powerless to disconnect. Ultimately they feel emotionally trapped in a maelstrom of breaking news, and although most of these events may be taking place on the other side of the planet, emotional immersion combined with the sheer volume of information and its carefully-crafted complexity tempts the consumer to relinquish all attempts at individual understanding in favour of shared experiences —«I don't read it myself but I forward it to my contacts if it looks important»; «I read it later but first I forward it to my contacts before I receive it from another group»— which ultimately have consequences. Vosoughi, Roy and Aral warn that:

If a rumour A is tweeted by 10 people separately, but not retweeted, it would have 10 cascades, each of size one. Conversely, if a second rumour «B» is independently tweeted by two people and each of those two tweets is retweeted 100 times, the rumour would consist of two cascades, each of size 100 (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018).

In this self-imposed demand for speed of reaction, in this fatigue caused by the desire to be connected 24/7, it is easy to fall into the «anything goes» mindset, where we go from reading between the lines to not even reading the headline because of our haste to click and share, make the news go viral and perform the minimal task of informing all the contacts on our networks.

Hyper-connection —infocación— translates into an induced attention deficit disorder that gives rise to a perfect feedback loop: the more connected we are and the more information we



consume, the lower our capacity for attention and hence the lower our capacity for discernment. Our finger on the screen becomes our brain, but devoid of recognition, reasoning or thought —much less critical thought— in response to what we «devour» with our eyes. The emotion of post-truth means that words, images and hashtags engage with our basic emotions of worry and sadness and go viral faster than those that trigger positive emotions.

In parallel with the essential work that must be done with the major platforms, the globalised use of the applications they design, the systematic capture of personal data and the necessary precautions against the potential threats of artificial intelligence, the concept of technological diplomacy in a hyper-connected society can be seen as a multi-tiered model for operating at the governmental, economic and social scale to curtail the harmful effects of information technologies and artificial intelligence and maximise their benefits:

As with other information and communication technologies, artificial intelligence can be seen as a multi-tiered system with technological, organisational and social layers that interact in both bottom-up and top-down processes. The diversity and vitality of these initiatives could stimulate a process of mutual inspiration and construction, and of learning. However, there is also a lack of what could be described as a layer of participation, of engagement by civil society, and the absence of a willingness for this to occur in a sustained and integrated way. We are missing an international dialogue —permanent, rather than in fits and starts— which would make it possible to set up conversations and discussion forums among all the stakeholders. Its purpose would be to build a metanarrative that genuinely deals with the economic, legal, social, ethical and human rights aspects of artificial intelligence in an overarching way so that the virtues of artificial intelligence are truly aligned in pursuit of the common good. It sounds complicated but it can be done. We believe that this is precisely the new role for the process that we call «technological diplomacy» (Feijóo, 2020).



### 3. Disinformation vs. fake news

Fake news is the most widespread and best-known among a multitude of terms, including fake news, false news, rumour cascades, post-truth, rumours and others, and there is no doubt that all these terms contribute in a similar way to the infocication to which citizens are exposed. In line with the criterion established in communications research (Rodríguez Pérez, 2019), the European Commission considers recommends the use of less confusing terms. Fake news can be defined as false news, a lie or an attack or political opinion that goes against a line of thought and implies a clear intention to distort the truth. This single term may have been co-opted to express an overabundance of meanings. According to the European Union, disinformation is defined as:

verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm». Public harm comprises threats to democratic political and policymaking processes as well as public goods such as the protection of EU citizens' health, the environment or security. Disinformation does not include reporting errors, satire and parody, or clearly identified partisan news and commentary. The actions included in the present Action Plan are aimed only at disinformation contents that have a legal character according to national or European Union legislation, and will be understand without prejudice to

the European Union legislation or the legislation of any of the member states that may be applicable, including the rules on illicit contents (European Commission, 2018a: 1).

## 4. Disinformation and the media

Whenever a fake news item or false image is removed, when there is time to reflect calmly on disinformation and its evil arts, we cannot avoid experiencing a sense of ridicule, always justified by an excess of information and by the infocication to which we are subjected by current affairs, the media, politics, lobbies, etc.

For example, an analysis of the approach to information during the wave of infections generated by influenza-A in 2009 raises the notion of mistrust towards professionals and media by a society which —although it has access to information— collectively lacks any willingness to spend time verifying it (Nino González, Barquero Cabrero & García García, 2017: 88). This model appears to be consistently repeated in the response to various types of crisis.

Again in 2015, the European Union flagged up the existence of disinformation campaigns originating in Russia and aimed at destabilising the democratic progress in certain Eastern European countries, as in the case of Ukraine. The European External Action Service classifies these campaigns as hybrid threats, which involve misleading the public by means of disinformation during military or political conflicts (European Commission, 2016a). In 2016 it set up the work group East StratComm (<https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/2116/questions-and-answers-about-the-east->).

Disinformation can be a destabilising weapon in democratic processes. Here we could mention by way of example the role of the Internet Research Agency in the 2015 US presidential elections; the referendum on whether the United Kingdom should remain in the EU in 2016, and the Cambridge Analytica scandal, among others. Apparently very few lessons have been learned, as all the alarm bells are ringing after the response to the results of the US presidential elections, which broke records of disinformation in the first 24 hours of vote counting.

In 2019 NATO conducted an experiment focused on the black market for social media manipulation and its professionalisation. The practices analysed by the report include creating fake accounts, posting or purchasing fake contents and comments and false likes to amplify the results, which are further magnified by the speed with which they are spread. Finally, the major platforms still appear to find it very difficult within their dynamic to identify and close down inauthentic or manipulative accounts (Bay & Fredheim, 2019).

The advertising market measures part of its success by the number of clicks a user makes when promoting sensationalist and viral contents. «This facilitates the placement of advertisements on websites that publish sensationalist content that appeal to users’ emotions, including disinformation», according to the report published by the Global Disinformation Index (GDI, 2019).

The Covid-19 crisis offers a perfect illustration of this practice. According to the GDI’s calculations (GDI, 2020), the profits obtained by some 500 websites containing disinformation contents on Covid-19, in English, amounted to \$25 million between January and June 2020. And all this by following one simple strategy: a media outlet with an Internet presence publishes a news item that is sensationalist, dramatized, fake, a rumour or whatever term we wish to use. When it does so, it includes or inserts commercial advertising. The result is that it



is accessed by millions of people who are impacted by the news item and immediately make the content go viral, while consuming advertising from well-known commercial brands who have paid to appear there.

## 5. Removing fake contents: informing on disinformation

### 5.1. THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Work is being done to raise awareness of disinformation on several levels. In 2018 the European Commission defined online disinformation as algorithms based on the business criteria of the major digital platforms, which prioritise sensationalist contents and facilitate their dissemination among like-minded users. These algorithms indirectly increase polarisation and reinforce the effects of disinformation. The Commission also alerted to the existence of automated services or bots that «amplify the spread of disinformation» and ultimately facilitate the creation of fake accounts with massive potential. Here the Commission underlines how:

Users themselves are also playing a role in disseminating disinformation, which tends to travel more quickly on social media due to the propensity of users to share content without any prior verification. The ever-increasing volume and speed of content flowing online increases the risk of indiscriminate sharing of disinformation (European Commission, 2018a).



The solutions proposed to combat disinformation include the transparency of its source, diversity conducive to critical thinking and quality journalism, media literacy, the credibility and traceability of information, and participation by the authorities, online platforms, advertisers, media and citizens.

In April 2018 the European Commission's Directorate General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology (DG Connect) announced a public consultation on the circulation of fake news and disinformation via online media. The conclusions of the study included a request for the media to self-regulate, and the need to equal the conditions between content producers and social media platforms through new regulation.

EUvsDisinfo (<https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases>) is another website analysing disinformation in the context of the European Union, and particularly in relation with issues concerning countries in Eastern Europe and the Russian sphere of influence. It was created in 2018 and has now analysed almost 10,000 news items.

More recently, the European Digital Media Observatory (<https://edmo.eu>) was launched in June 2020 to bring together university research spaces and opinion leaders and create a fact-checkers hub to limit disinformation in the EU.

The Commission's work in this area focuses on improving the detection of disinformation and analysing its elements, protecting the democratic integrity of electoral processes, and rebutting news related with falsehoods about the EU. This is done through the services of the Commission's representations in the various member states, working under the early warning criterion (Rapid Alert System, RAS) and cooperating with online platforms according to the

principles of the Code of Good Practices in the fight against disinformation, by promoting digital literacy and empowering civil society.

The Commission itself has set up a website specifically targeting the infodemia, namely disinformation in the context of the Covid-19 crisis ([https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation_en)).

## **5.2. THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CODE OF GOOD PRACTICES IN RESPONSE TO DISINFORMATION**

The European Commission encourages companies and associations to adhere to the goals and commitments in the Code, in order to identify the actions necessary to combat disinformation. These are, as included in the text of the Code:

- The scrutiny of advertising placements in order to monitor the economic capacity of the purveyors of disinformation. The signatories may suspend advertising, limit the insertion of paid advertisements, and check facts.
- Targeted advertising or political advertising must guarantee transparency. The signatories agree to comply with the principles of EU law and the codes of self-regulation.
- Integrity of services, centred essentially on the importance of closing down false accounts and establishing marking systems for zombie emitters to ensure that they cannot be confused with human interactions.
- Consumer training. Diluting the visibility of disinformation by training consumers to recognise reliable contents.
- Training the research community. Checking research data, facilitating independent research.

Each year the Commission publishes a self-assessment report with the participation of signatories such as Mozilla, Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Twitter and others. The latest report dated September 2020 acknowledges the efforts of the online platforms and the advertising companies through their self-imposed self-regulating measures, and highlights the challenges still pending and the limitations in regulating disinformation. It points out in its conclusions:

This is a unique and innovative tool that is acknowledged worldwide and promotes cooperation with partners such as Australia and Canada, and which has created a structure of cooperation with the major online platforms. [...] The Code must be improved by clarifying the definition of concepts, procedures and in the transparency of indicators and monitoring. It should also involve the advertising sector to a greater degree. It must present a more structured model of cooperation between the research community and the major platforms (European Commission, 2020a: 19).

## **5.3. ENTITIES AND ORGANISATIONS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST DISINFORMATION**

In addition to the European Union, and including the participation of the entities and organisations that are signatories to the Code against disinformation, there are also independent research



institutes such as those already mentioned, namely OdiselA and the Global Disinformation Index. These are platforms of professionals or associations formed by individuals who work to fight against disinformation. Some leading examples are:

- Provenance (<https://www.provenanceh2020.eu>) is formed by a consortium which since December 2018 has brought together entities and organisations to develop verification tools for use by the general public and content creators. According to their declaration of March 2020, their mission is to combat information fraud and disinformation.
- SOMA (<https://www.disinforepository.org>) Social Observatory for Disinformation and Social Media Analysis, formed by independent members whose aim is to support the EU in its fight against disinformation.
- In Spain, Maldita (<https://maldita.es>) is a journalistic tool that refutes fake contents in the media.

Other useful applications for detecting disinformation include Google’s reverse image search, which provides information on an image’s metadata (date, place, original source) or colours, and any manipulation it may have undergone. Fake check is the action of checking data before publication by the media. This verification system may prevent disinformation and act against inferior quality news media.

## 5.4. THE ROLE OF CITIZENS



It is essential to appeal to citizens’ responsibility and their use of social media. The European Commission has conducted two citizen consultations on this subject. One was the special Eurobarometer (EB 452) (European Commission, 2016b), which showed how a small majority of respondents trusted the veracity of the information offered by the media in the EU28<sup>3</sup> (53 %), falling to 38 % for Spain. The same question on the trustworthiness or reliability of social media (social networks on the Internet), was answered in the affirmative by only 32 % of respondents in the EU28 and 26 % in Spain.

In March 2020 a special Eurobarometer (EB 503) examined the effects of digitisation on our lives (European Commission, 2020b). The interview included two questions on fake news and disinformation. According to the answers, 61% of the respondents in the EU27 and 60% in Spain are of the opinion that the responsibility for combating fake news and disinformation lies with the media. 53% of EU27 respondents believe the public authorities should be responsible, while for Spain the figure is only 27%.

The answers to the question of how frequently the respondents come across news or information they believe distorts reality or is false are grouped into: every day, with 27% for the EU27 and 45% for Spain; and at least once a week, with 25% for the EU27 and 21 % for Spain.

It is worth noting how in 2020 the trust in the media expressed in the 2016 survey has given way to an implicit request to these same media to control disinformation. Another interesting finding among respondents in Spain is the demand for the public authorities to play a role in this control, although this opinion is less widespread in other EU states. And how do

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3/ EU28 including the United Kingdom. EU27, excluding the United Kingdom.



the respondents believe they should act? 46% of respondents in the EU27 (43% for Spain) want them to help citizens better identify disinformation; 36% of respondents in the EU27 and 35% in Spain believe they should support pluralism in information and quality journalism; while slightly higher percentages (38 and 37% respectively for the EU27 and 34 and 31% respectively for Spain) cite regulating the social media platforms and supporting fact checking services as a way to reduce disinformation.

From the point of view of the individual, other verification elements must be taken into account before «re-tweeting or making a news item go viral» to the list of contacts. Details such as the headline (is it eye-catching or difficult to believe?); by-line (when there is none or when it comes from an unknown source); exclusivity (the fact that it does not appear in any other media outlet); the format (highly saturated colours, eye-catching font size); date (either absent or quite recent); writing style (with grammatical errors or errors of expression); images that are used out of context or of low quality; links that trigger an error message; and finally content based on facts that are impossible to verify. These are all warning signs that can prevent the spread of disinformation.

The Code of Good Practices refers to training consumers «by improving the findability of trustworthy content [...] and facilitating content discovery» (European Commission, 2018a).

## 6. Transparency, information and democratic strength in the European Union



### 6.1. THE PRINCIPLE OF TRANSPARENCY IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

The European Union maintains a policy of transparency that produces a form of communication and information whose aim is to be available down to the local level. EU institutions, organisations and agencies offer very comprehensive press conferences and press releases, with links to allow users to expand the information, and direct contact with the people responsible for the news item.

Immersion in social media is another feature of the way the institutions communicate. The press services, College of Commissioners, members of the European Parliament etc. all have accounts on Twitter, Instagram and other social networks commonly used in the European area.

The Europa Portal is the official page of the EU, a place where citizens can consult all the information on its history, institutions, citizens' rights, policies, funding opportunities, legislation, jurisprudence, publications, statistics, research and funding calls, press releases, images, videos and television, in the over one million sites included in the domain: <https://europa.eu>.

All this is offered under a criterion of open, free and multilingual access which can almost be described as instant, since the portal's contents are updated on a daily basis, and their structure allows users to browse, consult the latest documents or communications, request documentation from the archives or records of the institutions and access informative material.

The EU's institutions have also reacted by issuing data in the case of disinformation. Evidence of this is the page of the Secretariat for Foreign Action and Security Policy and the page on the Covid-19 crisis mentioned above, each in their sphere of action and designed to refute and clarify the disinformation published by different media.

According to Declaration 17 of the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, «the transparency of the decision-making process strengthens the democratic nature of the institutions and the public's confidence in the administration» (Ramón Reyero, 2020; 29). It adds, according to article 255 of the Treaty of Amsterdam, that the citizens of the Union and any natural or legal persons with a registered address in any member state are entitled to access the documents of the institutions (Unión Europea, 1999).

The Europa Portal (<https://europa.eu>) is an example of this goal of transparency, and is reinforced by a communication structure that is present throughout the whole of the European territory at the national and local level. Since the main aim is for citizens to understand European policies so they can take part in debating them, and to engage in their application based on criteria of cohesion, the online structure is the most suitable for this purpose. At the national level, the European Commission representations in each member state depend on the Commission's Directorate-General for Communication. They perform the important task of liaising with the media in each state, and include a press service in their structure. They also serve to facilitate the understanding of European policies by national institutions, companies and citizens.

The actions of the European Commission's representation in Spain include the daily scanning of social networks and identifying and publishing rebuttals in the social media, drafting informative articles on a range of EU current affairs, and collaborating with influencers and fact-checkers. They also have an agreement with the European Observatory against disinformation in Spain and with international partners such as the World Health Organisation and NATO, and at the local level they are supported by the European information networks in Spain, and particularly by the Europe Direct network.



## 6.2. EUROPEAN INFORMATION NETWORKS

The European Union's Directorate-General for Communication is responsible for the Europe Direct network ([https://europa.eu/european-union/contact/europe-direct-answering-your-questions-about-eu\\_es](https://europa.eu/european-union/contact/europe-direct-answering-your-questions-about-eu_es)), and coordinates over 700 independent information points throughout the whole of the EU. The Europe Direct network includes the EDIC, Europe Direct information centres, which are mainly located in public institutions and whose purpose is to offer information to the general public. The EDIC play a key role in the local and regional debate on the European Union, participate in the media and serve as the return channel for public opinion to the institutions. In Spain the network has almost 37 EDIC.

The Europe Direct network also includes the European Documentation Centres (UDC). The UDC were created in 1963 by means of agreements signed between the universities where they are located and the European Commission. There are currently over 300 universities throughout the EU with a European Documentation Centre, 34 of them in Spain. The UDC are staffed by experts in European affairs, and their aim is to support research into European issues and promote the debate on the EU and its policies. They offer information and training in resources in the European Union, including documents, databases, calls, etc. and on issues related with the process of integration. They also answer requests for information from the general public, companies and the media, among others. The UDC participate in shared

projects developed between several centres at the national and European level. 96% of their information sources are official European Union publications and 94.3% of the websites are official European Union pages, followed by monographs and scientific journals (86.1%) (Katsirikou, Rigakou & Giannopoulou, 2019: 7).

Thanks to the Europe Direct network, as in the case of other specialised networks depending on the European Commission, anyone can find a link to European information at the local level and in their own language, and be served by expert staff (<https://centro-documentacion-europea-ufv.eu/redes-de-informacion-de-la-union-europea>)

## 7. Digital literacy

Based on the concept of information literacy recognised by the American Library Association in 1989 and defined as recognising and having the skill to locate, use and evaluate information, the concept (Sample, A., 2020) has today evolved into the term digital literacy. The aim is currently to include new elements in this concept that integrate the paradigm shift brought about by the arrival of information technologies, social networks and digital media. Information literacy today therefore covers a broader spectrum, such that:

It is understood as a process. The aim of metaliteracy is to study information that is dynamic, continuously generated and shared. Metaliteracy is the ability to critically acquire different competences and recognise an integrated need for literacy in the information ecosystem (Mackey & Jacobson, 2014: 2).

Metaliteracy should include the acquisition of competences in the same way as in information literacy, but within the digital ecosystem. A new media literacy is needed to ensure a rapprochement between information technologies and training in judgement in response to disinformation (Borges & Marzal García-Quismondo, 2017).



### 7.1. THE EUROPEAN DOCUMENTATION CENTRES AND INFORMATION AND DIGITAL LITERACY

In spite of —or precisely because of— the EU’s commitment to transparency, EU documentation can be seen as one vast ecosystem. A European Documentation Centre can easily generate almost 200 emails referencing more than 300 documents in answer to a query from a single person working on their doctoral thesis (Steletti & Mestre, 2017: 5).

The interdisciplinary experience around the process of European integration and its policies is ensured by updating the knowledge through annual training meetings, expert management of European databases, transparency registers, archives etc., as well as the documents generated by the institutions.

The centres also offer information on the EU through their social networks. In 2019, 75.4% of all the centres in the network had their own website, and 47.5% had a presence on some social media, from where they offered information on European issues (Katsirikou, Rigakou & Giannopoulou, 2019: 7). Essentially, the centres include consulting on the EU in their information services while they prepare informative reference material and/or publications.

For some years now, according to the same authors, the centres have undertaken important work in information and digital literacy, an activity that accounts for 56.6% of their work within the university, either through courses and sessions organised by the centre itself or by taking part in other undergraduate or postgraduate courses. It is also worth noting their participation in citizen debates/dialogues #EUDialogues, such as the one organised by the Institute of European Studies with the European Documentation Centre of the *CEU San Pablo University* in October 2017 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmKy6NWC0og>). These debates are sponsored by European institutions, many of them in collaboration with the European Documentation Centres.

On the subject of disinformation, the European Commission has highlighted the need for citizens to improve their knowledge of the information on the European Union in order to understand the decisions taken by its institutions. This is precisely one of the tasks of the network of European Documentation Centres.

## 7.1. DIGITAL COMPETENCES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

For some years, the European EUROPASS curriculum <https://europa.eu/europass/es/how-describe-my-digital-skills> has included the description of digital competences contained in the document entitled DIGCOMP (Digital Competence Framework for citizens), the result of the work of a multidisciplinary group comprising representatives and experts from several member states (<https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/digcomp>) (Vuorikari et al., 2016). This includes five competences, of which the first define:

- Information processing: searching for online information using search engines, comparing different sources in order to assess the validity and credibility of the information, and saving information in the most suitable media.
- Content creation: producing digital contents, applying the proper format and respecting licences and copyright.
- Communication: communicating via several applications, sharing files and contents, managing collaboration tools, transmitting online knowledge under the basic standards of netiquette (DIGCOMP 2.0).

The complexity of information in the digital environment makes it advisable that the acquisition of this type of competences should be required not only in professional areas aimed at communication or information, but also considered to be basic and transversal competences within reach of any type of online media user.

## 8. Conclusions/Discussion

Although the phenomenon known as disinformation has a long track record, it is precisely the exponential growth of social media and networks in recent years, and our immersion in an environment of infocication, that has caused it to become a genuine concern for the proper functioning of democracies.



Since 2015, hybrid threats have led to flashpoints in several democratic processes, but the lessons learned in the Covid-19 crisis should now serve to create a system for preventing and alerting public institutions and media and defending citizens against the risks of disinformation.

Communication initiatives and strategies such as the European Union's appear to have sufficient potential to suggest that they are paving the way for work channels that may prove to be effective against disinformation: negotiating with the major communications platforms, supporting digital literacy, and reinforcing the policy of transparency and information for citizens on the European decision-making processes.

The initiatives of private entities, research institutes and others that are working to make the problem more visible by analysing risks and detecting disinformation are very useful for raising awareness of its scope, and for spearheading the fight against its effects.

The media must apply fact-checking in order to retain citizens' trust, and offer to collaborate to combat disinformation.

The European Documentation Centres and other EU information networks are a point of reference in information and digital literacy in regard to the European process of integration and its policies.

Citizens must take individual responsibility for understanding and identifying disinformation. Similarly, information and communication professionals must intensify their work to promote digital literacy, thus improving people's personal capabilities in the fight against disinformation.

## 9. Bibliography



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