

'Fake news' and the EU's response

Fake news – deliberately fabricated stories posing as journalism with the aim of manipulating readers – became an increasingly visible global phenomenon during last year's presidential election campaign in the United States, not least due to the growing use of social media as a source for news. Whereas recent research indicates that a majority of people have difficulties determining when news is fake, the EU's steps towards countering this growing information challenge are still tentative.

A global phenomenon with political impact

The phenomenon of 'fake news' is as [old](#) as the printing press. However, it gained momentum and global visibility during the final months of the 2016 US presidential election, when viral fake news across the political spectrum received more [engagement](#) on Facebook than real news. The Australian Macquarie Dictionary (AMD) – which chose 'fake news' as its [word of the year for 2016](#) – defines it as 'disinformation and hoaxes published on websites for political purposes or to drive web traffic, the incorrect information being passed along by social media'. Explaining the choice, the AMD argued that the term 'captures an interesting evolution in the creation of deceptive content as a way of herding people in a specific direction'. Social media and their personalisation [tools](#) have accelerated the spread of 'fake news'. A growing number of EU citizens (46 % on average in 2016) follow [news on social media](#); six out of ten news items shared are passed on [without](#) being read first; and US [research](#) has shown that most young, digital-savvy school and college students have difficulties in identifying fake news.

Disinformation as an information warfare tool

Fake news headlines seem tailored to trick users into sharing the stories, making them spread fast and far amongst like-minded users. Sometimes the aim is simply to generate traffic (['clickbait'](#)). However, when designed to deceive users for political purposes, it falls under ['disinformation'](#): dissemination of deliberately false information. Disinformation is part of a strategic tool kit that non-state and state actors can use to undermine adversaries. Russia has been using information [operations](#) in its on-going [hybrid war](#) against Ukraine, and continues to apply it in its ['holistic'](#) information warfare against the EU and the West. Fake news proliferation during the US presidential campaign was accompanied by selective leaks of emails from Democratic Party officials. A declassified US intelligence [assessment](#) said that Russia used professional 'trolls' (internet warriors) and Russian state broadcaster RT 'as part of its influence efforts'. In March 2017, a cybersecurity expert told a US Senate [panel](#) investigating President Donald Trump's alleged ties to Russia that the information measures had worked, because Trump and his team promoted [narratives](#), including false ones, serving Russian interests. In the same hearing, the Senate Intelligence Committee's Mark Warner claimed that Russia paid thousands of people to create and pedal fake anti-Hillary Clinton news, targeting key [swing states](#).

The Kremlin has acknowledged its information warfare capabilities ahead of key elections in Europe

So far, Russia has denied all allegations of interference in the US election. But on 22 February 2017, Russian Defence Minister, Sergey Shoigu, announced that 'information operations forces have been established that are expected to be a far more effective tool than all we used before for counter-propaganda purposes', arguing that Russian 'propaganda needs to be clever, smart and efficient'. At the same time, Russia's foreign ministry itself began to publish 'materials that contain false information about Russia' on its [website](#). Security [analysts](#) say that Shoigu's announcement indicates that Russia can no longer deny propaganda activities. The most likely targets for Russian information operations are its immediate neighbours (Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic States), the western Balkans, and major EU countries holding elections in 2017, in particular [France](#) and [Germany](#)). There is also [concern](#) that the 2019 European Parliament elections could be targeted. Pro-Kremlin information campaigns boost Moscow's [narrative](#) of a 'weak and morally decayed EU that is about to collapse'.



'Fake news' as a slur for unwelcome media reports: a 'post-truth' phenomenon?

The 'fake news' trend is seen as an element in the deeper democratic [challenge](#) of what is known as the 'post-truth' era. Post-truth – the Oxford Dictionaries' [word of the year for 2016](#) – is defined as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'. In a move that allegedly signified this '[new reality](#)', President Trump's counsellor, Kellyanne Conway, used the notion of '[alternative facts](#)' to describe [claims](#) made by White House press secretary, Sean Spicer, about the size of the [crowds](#) attending the inauguration ceremony, contradicting what he called 'shameful and wrong' mainstream [media reports](#). The [same day](#), Trump – talking to Central Intelligence Agency staff – called the media 'some of the most dishonest human beings on earth'. Trump has repeatedly described [news](#) (outlets) that he appears to dislike as '[fake news](#)', 'dishonest', an '[enemy of the people](#)' and 'the [opposition](#)'. *International media watchdogs warn against 'misleading the public'*

Information freedom watchdogs, such as Reporters Without Borders, [warned](#) in March 2017 that Trump's statements could set a 'dangerous example for the world's press freedom predators' who see the notion of 'fake news' as justification to criminalise critical media. Also in March, the UN special rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, the OSCE representative on freedom of the media, and other international monitors of freedom of expression issued a [joint declaration](#) on 'fake news', disinformation and propaganda. They expressed alarm at 'instances in which public authorities denigrate, intimidate and threaten the media, including by stating that the media is "the opposition" or is "lying"', thus undermining public trust and confidence in journalism as a public watchdog, with the risk of misleading the public by 'blurring the lines between disinformation and media products containing independently verifiable facts'.

Growing concern in Europe raises pressure on social media companies

In Europe, reflecting the increased concern over the 'fake news' phenomenon, the European Parliament's then-President, Martin Schulz, in December 2016 called for a [European solution](#) to the problem of fake news. Andrus Ansip, European Commission Vice-President in charge of the digital single market as well as digital economy and society, said in January 2017 he was 'worried' about fake news, 'especially after the elections in the United States'. He urged Facebook and other social media firms to boost their [efforts](#) to counter 'fake news', adding that self-regulatory measures in the sector could be complemented by 'some kind of clarification' from the EU. On 14 March, German Justice Minister, Heiko Maas, proposed imposing fines of up to €50 million on social media companies who fail to remove hate speech and 'fake news'. Also in March, Sweden announced [plans](#) to boost the resilience of its society ahead of the 2018 general election. [Fact-checking websites](#) are currently mushrooming across the world, among others the pan-European fact-checking coalition [CrossCheck](#). Although social media platforms have resisted being labelled as publishers, Facebook in December 2016 announced a [tool](#) that enables users to 'flag' fake news reports for review by [third-party](#) fact-checkers from the International Fact Checking Network (IFCN). The initiative cooperates with media outlets in EU Member States and became operational on 22 March 2017. There are also increasing [calls](#), including from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, for children to be taught in schools how to spot fake news.

Increasing calls to strengthen the EU's 'myth-busting' team

The [European Council](#) in 2015 asked the EU High Representative, Federica Mogherini, to submit an action plan on strategic communication to address Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns. As a result, the EEAS's [East StratCom task force](#) was set up in September 2015. Since then, the team – consisting of some ten people – has been working without its own budget, drawing on the existing EU strategic communication budget and staff from EU institutions and Member States. It relies heavily on volunteers to collect the disinformation stories (more than 2 500 examples in 18 languages since 2015) it presents and explains in its weekly [newsletters](#), as part of its efforts.

The European Parliament, in its [23 November 2016 resolution](#) on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda, warned against Russian anti-EU propaganda, and called for reinforcement of the East StratCom task force, including through 'proper staffing and adequate budgetary resources'.

A number of prominent European security experts, historians and lawmakers – including Members of the European Parliament – in an [open letter](#) of 21 March 2017 criticised Mogherini's alleged 'irresponsibly weak' stance on Russia's 'brutally aggressive disinformation campaign' (boosted by over €1 billion annually by the Kremlin). The signatories called for a budget in single million euros for the East Stratcom task force, 'so it can start fulfilling its mandate.' They added that 'Europeans need to know by who and how they are being manipulated.'