Policy brief

DIPLOMACY AND INTERFERENCES IN SOCIAL MEDIA: CONTRASTING DISINFORMATION AND PROTECTING MULTILATERALISM

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ABSTRACT

Effective interstate communication is key to multilateral governance, but certain phenomena in the current global information ecosystem challenge it. The malicious diffusion of fake news and disinformation through social media and messaging apps deserves special attention, since it can hamper cooperation, reduce mutual trust and foster new and old conflicts. This policy brief highlights the main challenges that this phenomenon poses to multilateral cooperation and proposes concrete actions to tackle the spread of disinformation: the creation of a G20 communication office responsible for developing a comprehensive communication strategy, including a dedicated website, the launch of a T20 Taskforce, and a permanent roundtable on disinformation.

CHALLENGE

Social media (including messaging platforms)[1] are becoming more and more relevant for contemporary societies: they constitute the main sources of information for an increasing number of citizens. Recently, they have become essential communication tools for governments, diplomatic personnel, international organisations (IOs), and all actors populating the current international system. Social media can be used by states as tools to project power, by spreading manipulated information or fake news or to libel individuals or institutions working in crucial sectors. Both authoritarian and democratic leaders tend to deploy them quite often (Farhall et al. 2019; Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019) in order to pursue their political goals: inter alia, to delegitimise disruptive journalists and media, to discredit political opponents or leaders of foreign states, to orient electoral choices in other states or even to contribute to the justification of especially grave decisions, such as foreign interventions motivated by alleged violations of international law by third countries' governments (Giusti and Piras 2021). In particular, the use of disinformation by state and non-state actors to interfere in domestic affairs of other countries (e.g., before and/or during political elections or referenda) is endangering not only the very concept of sovereignty, but also the independence and security of states and the functioning of democratic processes, with serious implications for relations among states and multilateralism as a consWequence (Hansen and Lim 2018; Hollis and Ohlin 2021). Moreover, such behaviour undermines the reciprocal trust of actors who participate in the multilateral governance of the international system and it makes enduring and effective cooperation on global challenges much more difficult to achieve.

SOCIAL MEDIA CHALLENGES TO MULTILATERALISM

Effective communication is key to multilateral governance, and it is especially useful to envisage and implement actions which require the constructive cooperation of G20 governments and third parties, involving not only governments but also civil society actors – such as in the case of actions needed to realise the goals defined in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, the actions defined in the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, and the measures to contrast the Covid-19 pandemic (in primis realising far-reaching vaccination campaigns and guaranteeing people's safe mobility).

As underlined by Mark Zuckerberg, social media are a sort of a "town square": if you want to be part of the conversation, you have no choice but to be there (The Economist, October 2020). However, the use of social media can cause a polarisation of opinions and sectarianism and harbour conflictual relationships among individuals, groups, political parties, and states. Moreover, since our activities happen mostly in-between the digital and the physical worlds (Floridi 2014), spill-over effects are more and more frequent and conflicts can move offline from social media and have an impact on violent conflicts (Zeitzoff 2015). Therefore, the spread of malicious fake news and disinformation can be a tool of hybrid war (Duncombe 2018) with negative implications for multilateralism too.[2]

SOCIAL MEDIA AS INFODEMIC VECTORS

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown how the spread of disinformation on sensitive issues – a phenomenon known as "infodemic", conceptualised by the WHO in 2020 – can powerfully influence people's behaviour and affect the impact of countermeasures deployed by governments.[3] Disinformation can even speed up the epidemic by influencing and fragmenting the social response to the disease (Cinelli, Quattrociocchi et al. 2020); moreover, people might find it difficult to discern which information sources are trustworthy, especially if the scientific community does not reach a unanimous position and scientists provide different explanations and solutions for a given problem. Moreover, while the production of accurate and detailed information can be expensive and time-consuming, fake news can cheaply and quickly fill the gap and satisfy the public's demand for information, at least for a broad target. The "infodemic" highlights the need for evidence-based policymaking with a high quality scientific advisory system. Without knowledge, research, data, and coordination among key actors, leaders run the risk of enacting very fragmented and even controversial political responses by relying on a rooted policy style that is overly influenced by the rules and structure of civil service and the political system they operate in (Howlett and Tosun 2019, p. 10) and is unfit to change.

The challenges mentioned show the urgency of dealing with regulating social media, assigning the responsibility of content control to social media companies or to ad hoc nominated expert panels, engaging states and regional organisations such as the EU in the creation of an international regulation, policing with algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI), and investing in specific digital education programmes.

PROPOSAL

The proposal outlined in this policy brief aims to offer some possible strategies for avoiding the negative effects produced by the spread of disinformation. We have envisaged two innovative forms of governance with a double mission, **one reactive and the other proactive**, which should first of all contain the diffusion of fake news and disinformation in social media, and thus settle misunderstandings and conflicts among the main stakeholders of multilateralism. Secondly, they should contribute to suggesting a new style of communication, establishing new patterns of communicative behaviour especially in very critical situations.

SPEAKING WITH ONE VOICE

In order to contribute to the fight against malicious disinformation, formal and informal institutions working on international multilateral governance need to work towards increasing the clarity and accuracy of the information they produce, in order to improve their reputation as authoritative sources of information and reduce the rumours on fundamental issues which tend to circulate in order to fill information voids. As far as the G20 is concerned, there is a need to speak with one voice on some issues that are perceived as fundamental. The current G20 communication system hardly seems suitable for the task: the absence of a general G20 website significantly limits the perception of the G20 as a prominent actor within the multilateral system; moreover, communication through traditional media and social media is in the hands of the government chairing the forum and it shifts on a yearly basis. This weakens any official G20 stance, and it makes the conduct of any medium- and long-term discussion impossible, or very fragmented and noisy. So, there are no shared positions among G20 members on some specific issues – e.g., migration management, development cooperation, climate change and environmental protection – and, even with respect to those issues about which a consensus can be reached, the dissemination of the information produced within the T20 framework is very limited in scope.

A possibility to improve the current situation would be to create a **G20 communication office**. This office should produce a **G20 website** where all the different websites created for the yearly Presidencies could be hosted, in order to provide journalists and citizens with reliable and accessible information regarding the Group's activities. Also, the communication office should be in charge of a comprehensive communication strategy deployed through official **G20 social media accounts** – connected to, but not coinciding with, the Presidency accounts. In other words, we suggest creating a permanent website hosting reports, studies, papers, data which are regularly uploaded once they have been discussed within the G20 communication team. The G20 communication team should be made up of communication professionals and experts on the various policies tackled by the G20. This group of people, selected on the basis of their curricula, will be in touch with those responsible for communication within each government and with the Ministries in charge of the policies

for which information is provided. It is also desirable that all the various website/webpages administrated by the country holding the Presidency have the same layout and items.

TACKLING DISINFORMATION WITH A T20 INFORMATION AND GLOBAL GOVERNANCE TASKFORCE

A dedicated **G20 Disinformation Taskforce** – including diplomatic personnel, communication experts, academics from different countries – could be created, with the objective of effectively cooperating with similar task forces operating within other institutions (e.g., the European External Action Service or the European Digital Media Observatory at the European University Institute) to produce updated and reliable studies and reports aimed at detecting and exposing any actors or networks involved in the creation and spread of fake news and disinformation campaigns. Moreover, the Taskforce ought to promote a shared code of institutional communication through social media. The task force would be also entitled to propose innovative solutions to disincentivise the creation and spread of fake news and disinformation. In order to define the tasks and working mechanisms for the G20 Disinformation Taskforce, it might be helpful to analyse similar tools developed by other prominent international actors, notably the EU. Since 2014, the main EU institutions have become aware of the risks of disinformation. In March 2015, the EEAS created the East StratCom Task Force, a specialised team working on delivering positive communication on the EU in the Eastern Neighbourhood as well as on detecting, exposing and contrasting fake news and disinformation originating from foreign sources. Following this model, within the EEAS Division on Strategic Communication two new specialised communication teams have been created in order to act effectively towards other geo-cultural areas: a Task Force for the Western Balkans and a Task Force South for the Arab-speaking countries. Moreover, through the Action Plan against Disinformation launched in 2018 the EU has complemented the three Taskforces with new monitoring and normative tools, such as the European Digital Media Observatory and the Code of Practice against Disinformation[4], aiming at making the fight against disinformation more systematic. As a matter of fact, the awareness-raising and communication campaigns conducted through social media have reached a wide audience and have proven helpful to contrast disinformation narratives on specific occasions – such as the elections for the European Parliament – or on topical issues – e.g., the deployment of anti-COVID-19 measures. A new G20 Disinformation Taskforce could benefit from the lessons learnt from the EEAS Taskforces and it could positively interact with them, creating synergies and contributing to the overall goal of detecting disinformation early and contrasting it, and easing multilateral interactions at the international level.

INTERNATIONAL LAW AND FOREIGN STATE CYBEROPERATIONS

The G20 Taskforce on disinformation should also consider certain countries' tendency to use the manipulation of information and cyberoperations to achieve foreign policy goals (weaponisation of information), posing hybrid threats. This should also be done in the light

that the "rules of war have changed … in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian and other non-military measures" (Gerasimov 2013).

The G20 needs to tackle the question of the legality of foreign cyberoperations seeking to influence democratic practices. Such cyberoperations include attempts to 'hack' elections and change the result of the vote, as well as efforts to influence political campaigns through social media and messaging apps, including by the promulgation of 'fake news' and the use of bots and trolls to make them viral. This is a very delicate question for at least three main reasons: first, even in presence of an attempt to interfere, it is rather difficult to link an attack to a precise government order; second, it is very difficult to assess the extent of any possible influence, because any attacks may merely reinforce pre-existing echo-chambers while at the same time have very limited effects on electoral behaviour, which depends on a number of other variables; third, even in the case of proof of interference through a cyber operation in another country, to what an extent can this be considered a violation of the rule of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of states (Egan 2017; Wright 2018; Wheatley 2019), and how can it be sanctioned?

DIALOGUE WITH SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

A permanent roundtable discussion involving G20 and social media corporations could be established. Drawing on the stimuli provided by the G20 Taskforce, continuous dialogue with social media corporations could allow for more effective cooperation among governmental and business actors; this would make it possible to pinpoint networks and hubs of disinformation, as well as to detect critical issues and promote favourable practices. This might eventually contribute to the adoption of standardised rules concerning fake news and disinformation for all social media platforms. It would also help to construct a collaborative relationship with social media for the diffusion of agreed and reliable information. In order to link institutional practices to the individual behaviours of social media users, the continuous involvement of civil society actors in the discussion should be encouraged, through the creation of participatory platforms and of dialogic fora and events. These would allow for the collection of input from NGOs, professional and education/academic networks and the sharing of experiences and information which could prove helpful in including a grassroots perspective in G20 discussions.

This form of dialogue could produce some proposals on the regulation of the various aspects of the detection and removal of fake news. It might also propose some measures for the punishment of those who have created and diffused fake news that can damage individuals, groups of people and states.

NOTES

[1] Social media are, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, those "forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content." A subset of social media includes messaging platforms and apps – such as Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Telegram, Viber, Slack, Line, etc. These platforms and apps allow message senders to reach a vast audience, but through the spread of messages along (private) social networks, instead of through publication on virtual public spaces (e.g., Facebook wall or Twitter board).

[2] See, for instance, the enthusiastic appreciation of social media by Christine Lagarde, Managing Director of the IMF, during a lecture in 2014: "The communications revolution too can be a potent force for good. It can empower people, unleash creativity, and spur change. Think about how Twitter messages helped to galvanize the participants in the Arab Spring, or how social media carrying the message of Malala in Pakistan pricked the conscience of the entire world."

[3] For an overview of infodemic, see the WHO's webpage dedicated to the phenomenon, described as "too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak": https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab_1.

[4] For an overview of the main goals and actions pursued by the East Stratcom Taskforce, see https://euvsdisinfo.eu/. The text of the 2018 Action Plan against Disinformation is available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/eu-communication-disinformation-euco-05122018_en.pdf, while the main document and the recent updates concerning the Code of Practice on Disinformation are available at: https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/code-practice-disinformation

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