Europeans demand resolute action to counter internet disinformation

Thursday 10 August, 2023

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More than half the EU population doubts the veracity of information on the web. Recognizing fake content and actively countering it comes more easily to those who are young and educated. Almost nine out of every 10 Europeans believe that tech companies, as well as government, should be held responsible.

The population in the EU expects greater efforts in the battle against the deliberate dissemination of information over the internet that is false or has been faked. Some 85% of EU citizens believe that the political class must do more to counter the dissemination of disinformation. As many as 89% demand greater effort from the providers of social platforms. The desire for greater intervention coincides with a clearly discernible awareness of the problem among the EU population. This is shown by a new study from the Bertelsmann Stiftung's "Upgrade Democracy" project. It found that more than half (54%) of those surveyed are frequently or very frequently unsure whether information from the internet is true. 39% indicate that they have been consciously aware of disinformation.

"Reliable information is the basis for making informed judgements and so also for democratic discourse," Kai Unzicker, the author of the study, says. "The European population feels great uncertainty regarding the digital content they can still trust and the content that has been deliberately manipulated. Anyone wishing to protect and strengthen democracy must not leave people to cope with disinformation on their own," the expert for democracy and cohesion at the Bertelsmann Stiftung says.

Fewer than half (44%) of all Europeans say they have checked information gleaned from the internet. Even fewer (22%) report false information or alert others to it. Age certainly plays a role. The younger and more educated respondents are, the more they contest the truthfulness of information and act to counter disinformation.

The "Upgrade Democracy" study also shows: The more social media channels the respondents use regularly, the more often they notice disinformation. Europeans are undecided regarding the effects of social media on democracy, with 30% seeing more disadvantages and 28% more advantages. 42% expect both negative and positive effects. There are differences between countries. Critical attitudes predominate in France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany; while people in Poland take a considerably more positive view of social media's effects on democracy.

The Bertelsmann Stiftung recommends setting up and expanding systematic monitoring by independent actors from the academic world and civil society. It should be possible at the same time to raise awareness of the risks of disinformation among the wider population.

Additional information:

The poll data are taken from “eupinions”, the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s opinion research tool. The survey was taken across the entire EU in March 2023. With a sample size of 13,270 respondents aged between 16 and 70, it is representative of the EU as a whole, as well as of the member states Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and Spain.

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