Chapter 5
Fighting the Fallacies: The 'Infodemic' and the European Commission

Marcos Barclay, Istvan Perger, and Matteo Salvai

5.1 Introduction

This chapter offers a short reflection on the experience of fighting COVID-19 mis- and disinformation from the perspective of a strategic communications team at the European Commission (henceforth referred to as the Commission). The authors speak in a personal capacity and do not represent an official position of the Commission. The period explored runs from the start of the pandemic until the time of writing in February 2022. The authors work in the Directorate-General for Communication in a unit dedicated to strategic communication, communication governance, and disinformation response. This chapter cannot fully represent the depth and breadth of operations and experience throughout the Commission and the European institutions during this period.[1]

For the EU, vaccine-related mis- and disinformation struck at the core of its fast developing role in pandemic management, thereby hitting what was arguably an

---

Marcos Barclay is an external service provider at the European Commission for DG COMM, Brussels, Belgium. The opinions in this chapter are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the decisions, policies, opinions, or views of the European Commission.

---

[1] For instance our work is limited to coordinating the internal communications response to mis- and disinformation within the EU, while EEAS focuses on foreign information manipulation and interference. DG CNECT centres its attention on working with the private sector, and developing updated rules for the online world. Council working parties such as the Horizontal Working Party on Enhancing Resilience and Countering Hybrid Threats and Working Party on Information discuss issues at Member state level.

M. Barclay · M. Salvai
European Commission at DG COMM, Brussels, Belgium

I. Perger (✉)
European Commission, Brussels, Belgium
e-mail: istvan.perger@ec.europa.eu

institutional soft spot in the space between regulation and fighting external information manipulation and interference. In this complex institutional landscape, our work led us to take an internal coordination function, knitting together different aspects of the EU's communication work on COVID-19 disinformation.[2]

Our aim is to offer an (albeit subjective) account of how these different activities came together and interacted during this period to react to this challenge. Its value, we hope, will be in providing a record for future colleagues and practitioners on the institutional, political, policy, and communication challenges for responding to an 'infodemic' in an organisation such as the EU.[3] The intensity of the crisis so far has already led to several lessons being learnt and important innovations introduced, which we wish to preserve with a view to building resilience and ensuring preparedness for future crises. For a more general readership, we offer a compressed summary of the EU's many strands of work in this field.

5.2 Three Pillars of the EU's Disinformation Fighting Operation

Before delving into our experience of the infodemic, it is necessary to give some background on our work and how it fits into the bigger picture of the EU's operation to tackle disinformation. Since 2015, the EU's work has evolved organically across broadly three pillars. The pioneer in the field was the European External Action Service (EEAS) and its Strategic Communications Division, with its initial mandate to address Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns (European Council 2015, p. 5). From this, it has continued to build and expand its work to tackle foreign information manipulation and interference (EEAS 2021a). Under the guidance of the Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology (DG CNECT), a second pillar covers work with the private sector. Online platforms including Facebook, Google, Twitter, Microsoft, and TikTok are encouraged to play their part in preventing the spread of mis- and disinformation through commitments made under the self-regulatory 'Code of Practice on Disinformation'.

To complement these efforts, the Commission's communication teams have been analysing, reacting, and de-bunking EU-related mis- and disinformation for many years. These initiatives have been, perhaps, less visible for being decentralised and tailored to local contexts and policy areas. In the context of the pandemic, the urgency of the situation raised important questions about how to address new challenges properly. Through the Commission's 'internal Network against Disinformation', these decentralised capacities were therefore brought closer together in an attempt to meet the scale of the threat.

---

[2] Any subsequent uses of 'we' or 'us' are to be understood as referring to the team working on disinformation communication coordination in the Directorate-General for Communication's (DG COMM) sector for 'governance, strategic coordination, and disinformation response'.

[3] Our interpretation of this term will be detailed in Sect. 5.3.

The authors of this chapter worked on the coordination of this Network during the pandemic. In this chapter, we explain how we approached the questions raised by the infodemic and how we responded through the Network. The questions are still very much open, but we hope our experience might advance the conversation further about how institutions can consolidate their communication capacities in order to meet such a threat.

It is important to stress that our perspective is just from one 'pillar' of the EU's operation, centred on communication through the 'Network against Disinformation'. The work of our colleagues in EEAS, DG CNECT, DG SANTE,[4] and other teams was also significant, and they will have their own equally important experiences to relate. We give due reference to their work while focussing on internal coordination, which we are most qualified to write about.

5.3   Evolution of the Infodemic

Our infodemic experience can be divided roughly into two halves: before and after the vaccine approvals and rollout. For us, the first half of the infodemic ran from March 2020 to December 2020 and the second 'vaccine half' ran from December 2020 to the time of writing.[5] Though by no means easy, the first half of the info-demic presented more conventional problems regarding transmitting factual infor-mation publically, while the second half introduced more complex dynamics.

5.3.1   Narratives Before Vaccine Rollout

Below is a summary of some of the main narratives we encountered before the authorisation of safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines, as well as during the initial rollout across EU countries:

- *Conspiracy Narratives*
  The pandemic is an evil plan by a secret group of individuals for some malign end. Frequent culprits cited included the World Economic Forum, Bill Gates, 'big pharma', China, secret societies, and, sometimes, even the EU. The most dangerous varieties involved some sort of denialism about the virus and its dangers by dismiss-ing it as a hoax.

---

[4] Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety.

[5] February 2022.

- *Breakdown of EU Solidarity*

  After initial accusations of a lack of solidarity among Member States, false stories continued to circulate about the hoarding of supplies (masks, personal protective equipment) at the expense of some Member States.

- *False Remedies*

  A number of miracle cures spread quickly, such as drinking hand soap to kill COVID-19 and other false advice. These threatened to give people a false sense of security. Even worse, examples led to fraud and scams involving fake therapies, as well as physical harm or death.

- Vaccine Critical/Refusal/Denialism Content

  Even before the vaccine rollout, scare stories circulated on the potential harm of a future vaccine, including death, cancer, infertility, a change in DNA, and a host of other already well-documented false claims.

- *Blaming the Pandemic*

  Connected to conspiracy narratives, some of these blamed the pandemic on certain groups such as migrants (Butcher and Neidhardt 2020). Some of these narratives led to hate speech.

Initial Response

Responses to the narratives outlined in the first half of the infodemic called on more conventional methods. While conditions were arguably at their most dangerous given the state of fear and confusion among the general population, the problem to be addressed concerned the difficulty in ascertaining the accuracy of information given the large quantities that were circulating. In a sense, this was a more straightforward problem to deal with than that which we saw later during the vaccine stage, even if there were still many unknowns. Conventional methods of proactive communication, amplifying reliable content, and de-bunking were adequate for reinforcing essential information and dispelling prevalent myths:

- *Proactive Communication*

  The Commission's social media accounts in the Brussels headquarters or via Commission representations in the Member States, relevant Directorate-General (DGs),[6] as well as EEAS accounts publicised a wealth of material communicating information on non-pharmaceutical health measures such as hand washing and physical distancing, while reassuring citizens through stories about recovery measures being taken by the EU. Community managers were aided with extensive Q&A repositories that were regularly updated and reviewed for accuracy as information changed. Social media assets were also shared widely among teams in headquarters and among representations to aid proactive communication as much as possible. This included photos, videos, and graphics. Personal messages by experts and

---

[6] Directorates-General (DGs) are the Commission's departments in charge of a certain policy field.

health professionals, as well as prominent figures such as President Ursula von der Leyen reinforced the tone. By October 2020, proactive communication on the importance of vaccination had already begun. A landmark corporate campaign on the NextGeneration EU recovery plan also ran in parallel, which contributed to the overall positive tone in the Commission's communication efforts in this period.

• *Debunking*

While the overall balance of communication output was more strongly in favour of proactive communication in this initial period, some direct de-bunking was necessary in the most egregious cases of mis- and disinformation. Our team set up a dedicated page on the EU's Europa webpage (European Commission n.d.-a) listing a number of the most prevalent claims with short de-bunks and counter-narratives. The structure of these de-bunks followed the de-bunking method recommended by Stephen Lewandowski in the *De-bunking handbook* (Lewandowsky et al. 2020). This page was translated in all 24 EU languages, providing a central resource accessible to citizens across the Union. The page was promoted on social media and served as a reference point for de-bunking by Commission community managers.

• *Resilience Building*

Resources were provided for key stakeholders to help them in their own fight against mis- and disinformation. DG SANTE produced a social media toolkit for healthcare professionals (European Commission 2020a). The toolkit provides handy tips on how to successfully navigate social media for healthcare professionals when combatting vaccine mis- and disinformation. Our team published a toolkit for teachers called *Spot and fight disinformation* (European Union n.d.) to help secondary school teachers introduce pupils to disinformation topics and build up their resilience against it.

5.3.2   Narratives After Vaccine Roll Out

December 2020 marked a turning point in our pandemic experience that coincided with the approval of vaccines in Europe and the announcement of the first deliveries. Unlike the mis- and disinformation narratives in the first half of the infodemic, the issue of vaccines was much more complex and required deeper thinking as to how respond.

Vaccine mis- and disinformation is not new, and certainly not exclusively a phenomenon of this pandemic. The Commission has been monitoring vaccine confidence for a number of years to inform vaccination rollout, address waning confidence, and mitigate the damaging effects on vaccination uptake (de Figueiredo et al. 2020). Part of the reason for the particularly challenging COVID-19 vaccine rollout is that vaccine mis- and disinformation touches on vitally important issues for the EU in its new role in pandemic management such as vaccine procurement and approval. This topic, therefore, posed a particularly pertinent problem from an EU communications perspective.

A further and more general reason is that while vaccines represent a single issue, they concentrate a number of other social and political issues touching on both national and international concerns. For example, fears about how much to trust governments and big companies. While these issues were certainly present before the vaccine rollout, the issue of vaccines and their urgency seemed to condense these previously diffused issues into one very tangible problem. Consequently, narratives surrounding vaccines took on a much more charged tone. Vaccines were like a proxy for citizens' mixed feelings towards authorities and their ability to lead them through the crisis, encompassing their suspicions, expectations, and hopes. One could say that the decision to take the vaccine was to some extent like casting a vote in an unofficial referendum on whether you trusted your government, leaders, and institutions. Again, given the EU's role in pandemic crisis management, this also presented an important challenge. The initial delay and difference in timings in the vaccine rollout between countries added to the pressure. By way of illustration, below are some of the main themes we encountered in this 'second half':

• *Vaccine Critical Content*[7]
  Several varieties of these narratives exist:

  (i) *Vaccines as experimental* – Many users were suspicious of the quick turn-around of vaccines and potential dangers from new mRNA technology. Some believed this would change DNA (see also 'conspiracy narratives'). The speed with which COVID-19 vaccines were developed also created suspicion.
 (ii) *Vaccine side effects* – In addition to themes covered above, claims about different dangers came and went with the news cycle. AstraZeneca was painted as unsafe for a variety of different demographics. Heart issues, particularly myocarditis in young men, became a particular focus. Exaggerated accounts about the prevalence of blood clots were also widespread. Stories about vaccines as dangerous for adolescents and children proliferated as approval came in for these demographics.
(iii) *Vaccines do not work/are useless* **–** Connected to the vaccines as experimental narratives but also including narratives connected to COVID-19 denialism, these narratives suggest that vaccines were not necessary.
 (iv) *Vaccines cause death* **–** In a similar vein, but even more extreme, with claims about vaccines leading to death through a range of maladies such as cancer or COVID-19 itself.
  (v) *Falsified/concealed data* **–** As vaccines rolled out across the world, different data sets by different health authorities came out. The differences, and the difficulty of interpretation, created an opening for manipulation of the data to claim that the vaccines were not working, or were even causing harm. In more extreme cases, certain sources claimed that the data was being totally made up by authorities.

---

[7] It is important to note that legitimate concerns were sometimes mixed up in this otherwise misleading content.

- *Conspiracy Narratives*

As described in the conspiracy narratives section for the first half, but with a focus on vaccines. Conspiracy ideologists claimed that vaccines were a conduit for secret plans involving microchips, 5G, mind control, big pharma, and other far-fetched ideas. Speculation about the interpretation of data also featured heavily.

- *Encroaching Totalitarianism*

In close connection to conspiracy narratives, many sources made claims that COVID-19 and health measures such as vaccines were a pretext for encroaching government control and intervention by big tech and big pharma. Some of these narratives were linked with the widespread anti-lockdown protests seen at the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022. The most extreme versions denied the reality of COVID-19 or combined with other anti-vax narratives. Again, data was used in questionable ways in support of these narratives.

While these were among the main themes we encountered, it is worth noting that these narratives are often intermeshed and interlinked. Different elements from each reinforce aspects of others. Even if different narratives can contradict each other, the 'interoperability' of these elements seems to create a self-reinforcing bubble for those who consume this content. The fluid nature of this content allowed sources to harness events in the news cycle and find angles to criticise vaccines, such as celebrities falling ill. A strong conspiratorial tone is often the glue that holds together all these elements.

5.4   The Infodemic for the EU

To understand how we approached these issues, we need to first explain the conceptual background for what we understand as disinformation and the infodemic in the context of the EU's competencies and the political mandate under which we were operating. WHO's concept of an infodemic was included by the Commission in the June 2020 Joint Communication with EEAS on COVID-19 disinformation (European Commission 2020b). In this document, the WHO definition features as a reference point.

WHO defines an infodemic as the phenomenon of

> too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak. It causes confusion and risk-taking behaviours that can harm health. It also leads to mistrust in health authorities and undermines the public health response. (WHO 2021)

If we break this down into its constituent elements, we can begin to see how the infodemic touched upon the EU's work and its competencies.

5.4.1   Where

In terms of geographic scope, for us (DG COMM)[8] 'the information environment'
encompasses the EU's information environment, meaning the physical but primarily online information sphere in EU Member States.

5.4.2   What

Next, we need to understand the Commission's framework for what counts as false
or misleading information (European Commission 2018a, p. 2). The joint EEAS
and Commission 2018 *Action Plan against Disinformation* is a key document
European Commission (2018b). While 'false' and 'misleading' are terms that
appear in our official documents, they feature as part of comprehensive definitions
of mis- and disinformation. By disinformation, we understand verifiably false or
misleading information that is created, presented, and disseminated for economic
gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and that may cause public harm.

Misinformation is also false or harmful but can be shared or produced in good
faith. This covers aspects of what we understand as 'false', but with greater emphasis placed on harm and intention. This also hints at what we understand by the more
complex idea of 'misleading'. Until recently, our notions of what is 'misleading'
have been understood primarily in epistemic terms and only secondarily in terms of
behaviour. In the *European Democracy Action Plan* (EDAP), the official scope has
been expanded, rebalancing existing definitions with greater acknowledgment of
the importance of behaviour (European Commission n.d.-b).

Two further categories capture the ways in which disinformation can be connected to activities that cause harm to the information environment without prejudice to their veracity. An 'information influence operation' describes coordinated
efforts by actors that use 'deceptive means' (as opposed to only deceptive content)
to influence a target audience. These actors can either be foreign or domestic. A
second category of 'foreign interference in the information space' refers to 'coercive and deceptive efforts to disrupt the free formation and expression of individuals' political will by a foreign state actor or its agents'. The emphasis for the latter
category is on external manipulation of the information environment and interference in the way societies conduct their public discourse. Both these additional categories are more agnostic to epistemic questions. Instead, they capture a focus on
behaviour rather than on content and the various tactics, techniques and procedures

---

[8] For other bodies such as EEAS, there may be a different sphere of concern, for example material
originating from outside the EU.

(TTPs) that can be used to manipulate the information environment and to damage it for malign purposes.[9]

5.4.3 Why

Under the above framework, it is clear in what ways content, which could count as mis- or disinformation, presents a threat to supporting EU Member States in keeping citizens safe, as well as ensuring good governance in the midst of the EU's fast developing role in pandemic management. As per the WHO's infodemic definition, the EU had a stake in tackling information that 'undermines the public health response'. Two political developments are worth highlighting in this respect: first, the EU was central in facilitating the joint procurement of vaccines; second, the EU's role in assisting recovery efforts.

Most notable is the NextGeneration EU package. This initiative took the step of financing EU funding by issuing common debt whose proceeds could be disbursed as grants or favourable loans to Member States. The EU was also at the heart of European level crisis management such as coordinated action on external, and in some cases even internal, borders, vaccine certificates and ensuring supplies of equipment. Underlying these innovations, a changed political climate saw a more general expectation from citizens that the EU step up and play its part in the health crisis, whatever its formal competencies.

The potential impact of the infodemic on these functions was made explicit in March 2020 when the European Council recognised the need to "resolutely counter disinformation with transparent, timely and fact-based communication on what we are doing and, thus, reinforce the resilience of our societies" (Joint Statement of the Members of the European Council 2020). Fighting disinformation was then included in the European Court of Auditors initial review of the EU's contribution to the public health response to COVID-19 (European Court of Auditors 2021a, p. 45). In the June 2020 *Communication* on COVID-19 disinformation, this commitment was reinforced through resolutions to step up coordination and collaboration between European institutions and Member States on disinformation. In the December 2021 *Council Conclusions*, this commitment was reiterated with special reference to combatting vaccine hesitancy due to disinformation (European Council 2021, p. 1).

---

[9] Following the tasking of the EDAP, the European External Action Service, in close cooperation with the European Commission, EU Member States, and international partners, is discussing an updated conceptual definition of 'foreign information manipulation and interference' to even better capture the full range of behavioural aspects.

5.5   Response to Vaccine Mis- and Disinformation

As we have shown, the false and misleading narratives in the 'second half' of the pandemic concerning vaccines were among the most relevant for the EU in its fast developing pandemic management function. This challenge, however, presented a new and deeper set of disinformation problems and questions for our strategic communications work. We can describe this shift in quantitative and qualitative terms. Quantitatively, the sheer volume of material exceeded that which had been seen on any one issue previously. It was simply too much for any one team to take on. Qualitatively, the nature of the content touched upon issues not only of urgent importance for health security, but also, uniquely, for safeguarding trust in the EU given its expanding and critical role.

To understand how these questions presented themselves to us, we have to look deeper into the resources the EU already had.

5.5.1   European External Action Service

In the March 2015 *European Council Conclusions*, heads of state and government called for the creation of a new strategic communication capability in the European External Action Service (EEAS), "to challenge Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns" (European Council 2015, p. 4). This development was important for explicitly granting one of the European institutions a mandate to address disinformation from foreign actors. In December 2018, the EEAS and the Commission published the aforementioned *Action Plan against Disinformation* (European Commission 2018b). As a joint document, it formally strengthened cooperation and information exchange between the two institutions and with Member States and envisaged closer integration of the EEAS's work with that of Member States through the establishment of a Rapid Alert System (RAS). The RAS allows EU institutions and all EU Member States to share information and analysis on a daily basis, as well as instantly alert each other in case of foreign information manipulation and interference, including disinformation. Information sharing also involves material for response purposes, including on proactive communication, as well as discussions on the EU's overall framework to tackle the threat.

The development of the EEAS's Strategic Communication (Stratcom) Division (EEAS 2021a) and success in leading the EU's efforts to tackle foreign information manipulation and interference, including disinformation, meant that it was well prepared to face external threats represented by the infodemic. For example, EEAS was able to provide special reports on information manipulation from external sources related (EU vs. DISINFO 2021) to the pandemic, as well as handling conspiracy narratives (EEAS 2021b). Its EUvsDisinfo project, in particular, was crucial in raising awareness of foreign actors trying to exploit the pandemic for their own gain (EU vs DISINFO n.d.). These measures were important for putting on public record the role of foreign actors in manipulating the information environment during the

pandemic and the potential impact of such activity. In addition to this, the cooperation within the RAS between Member States and EU institutions allowed for the exchange of information on threats and sharing of best response practices.

5.5.2 Working with the Private Sector – DG CNECT

In parallel to the development of a strategic communications capability to tackle foreign information manipulation and interference, including disinformation in the EEAS, the EU has enhanced the options and tools available to collaborate with online platforms and the advertising sector to fight online disinformation.

In 2018, the DG CNECT facilitated a process under which major researchers and stakeholders in the field of disinformation elaborated and devised an effective instrument to counter online disinformation by proposing a *Code of Practice on Disinformation*. The first worldwide example, the *Code*, is a self-regulatory instrument whereby signatories such as Facebook, Twitter, Google, Microsoft, and TikTok have made commitments to reduce the distribution of disinformation online.

Two years on, under the auspices of EDAP, the Commission has proposed detailed guidance to address the shortcomings of the original *Code of Practice*, to strengthen it, and make it an even more effective instrument to fight disinformation. In particular, the revised *Code* will include broadened participation, and aims to become a co-regulatory instrument within the upcoming update of the online rules foreseen within the Digital Services Act (DSA) (European Commission 2021). This would give the Commission enforcement powers with regards to the very large online platforms. At the time of writing, the *Code's* stakeholders are busy preparing a strengthened version, which will be presented in Spring 2022.

Thanks to this sustained cooperation with the platforms, DG CNECT was able to work with the *Code of Practice's* signatories to participate in a COVID-19-disinformation-reporting programme. As part of this programme, the signatories reported on actions taken to combat COVID-19 mis- and disinformation on their platforms, in particular by promoting authoritative content and updating policies in order to reduce the distribution of disinformation (European Commission n.d.-c).

5.5.3 Network Against Disinformation

The Commission's communication apparatus is divided between teams based in different services with mandates for a particular policy area, and a central operation in the Directorate-General for Communication (DG COMM). DG COMM is in charge of the overall coordination and governance of the Commission's communication actions with citizens (as the 'domain leader' service), as well as for liaising with the Commission Representation Office in each of the Member States. It also contains the Commission's spokesperson service (SPP).

These various arms of the Commission's communication infrastructure work in a decentralised manner, with different teams taking on initiatives to combat EU-related information manipulation and interference, including disinformation in their area of policy competence. The April 2018 *Communication* on disinformation recognised that in parallel to EEAS's strengthened mandate, and in light of the new *Code*, the Commission needed to "strengthen its strategic communication capability by first reinforcing the internal coordination of its communication activities aiming at tackling disinformation" (European Commission 2018c). Accordingly, an internal *Network against Disinformation* (referred to from now on as 'the Network') was mentioned in the subsequent December 2018 *Action Plan* as a bridge between the EEAS's strategic communication work and the communication apparatus of the Commission (European Commission 2018a). Hosted by a small team in DG COMM's strategy and corporate campaigns unit, the Network was set up with a view to the 2019 European elections, bringing together the institutions' communication services and ensuring the regular flow of information on threats and the exchange of best practices. In addition to representatives from each Commission Directorate-General and Commission representation, the EEAS, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee, and Committee of the Regions all participate in the Network. External speakers also feature regularly, including experts from EU agencies, academia, and think tanks such as the Oxford Internet Institute and the European Policy Centre, as well as colleagues from other institutions, including the UN, and from the private sector, such as YouTube.

5.6   Questions Posed by the Infodemic

Given this institutional context, the first and most obvious question raised by the infodemic was how to fill the space in between tackling foreign information manipulation and interference (EEAS) and the regulation of the platforms (CNECT). In this space, we find mis- and disinformation originating and circulating within Europe on COVID-19. While in normal times this space might be filled by a decentralised set of teams working in their particular area, the sheer scale and seriousness of the infodemic required a more coordinated and comprehensive approach with policy experts at its core.

The severity of the threat for the EU is doubly important if we recall that vaccines hit at the heart of the EU's fast developing role in pandemic management. This, therefore, raised the question of how to leverage a decentralised network of actors to understand and address a challenge that exceeds the capacities of any one element in the network. A second and related challenge is making sure everyone is on the same page. Given that the issue affects multiple areas of competence, how do you ensure everyone shares the same understanding of the threat? Once you have consensus, how do you ensure that the right people respond quickly, and in a way that is coherent and consistent with everything else going on? Third, how do you

make sure all the actors who are involved in the response are trained and prepared to take action as necessary when the time comes?

These are just some of the questions raised by an infodemic level event. While the parameters are particularly relevant in our institutional context, other large organisations with similarly diffused capabilities have faced, or will face, similar coordination challenges from an interdisciplinary challenge such as the infodemic. In Sect. 5.7, we detail our solutions and lessons learned.

5.7   A New Mandate for the Network

To realise the objective of a more coordinated approach, it was decided that the Network against Disinformation should be upgraded with a mandate to maximise the combined power of the participating communications teams. The intention was to leverage the collective resources of these teams in order to mount a response equal to the challenge. A review from the European Court of Auditors that coincided with this period also emphasised the need for clearer and more accountable coordination structures for tackling disinformation (European Court of Auditors 2021b).

Following consultation with members of the Network, a mandate was drafted to enable this upgraded collaboration. Under the new arrangement, the Network is able to convene working subgroups that gather expertise on specific thematic areas. Thanks to a streamlined channel of communication with senior Commission leadership, these groups can now seek approval to launch disinformation-fighting activities and pool resources across Directorate-Generals and other services more effectively. This is key to the empowerment of cross-service collaboration and the breaking down of silos. Importantly, while these subgroups help concentrate know-how and resources, they also preserve the autonomy of the participating teams. Thus, it was understood that the advantages of a decentralised approach could be preserved.

One key subgroup formed through this mandate was a 'vaccine disinformation' subgroup. The subgroup meets regularly to discuss the latest trends emerging online on COVID-19 disinformation addressed towards the EU and to coordinate communication responses. Knowledge is pooled through an internal weekly report compiled and distributed by DG COMM, with input from EEAS to the other services of the Commission, as well as other EU institutions. This effort synthesises the main narratives detected, and is combined with quantitative insights provided by the Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC). The purpose of the report is to give an overview of identified false or misleading top-level narratives and assess the risk level these narratives pose. It also provides links to fact-checks – wherever available – and, thus, empowers recipients to respond appropriately through debunking or other methods.

5.8   Results

If the infodemic presented a quantitatively and qualitatively escalated threat, how well did these new ways of working help deal with the problem? On the qualitative side, the vaccine subgroup facilitated the production of the weekly report, which streamlined a common situational awareness that could be developed and disseminated among key actors. This addressed the problem that different teams were seeing diverse aspects without knowing what to respond to, if, indeed, they should respond at all. This was a problem engendered by the overwhelming and cross-cutting nature of vaccine mis- and disinformation, often exceeding the competency and expertise of any one team. The report made clear for everyone what the many threats were for the week and offered a rationale as to what sort of response would be appropriate, at what level, and using what sort of language. Very often this was more about explaining when not to respond as much as when to respond. This helped bring some clarity and organisation among operational communication teams in the face of a threat, which might otherwise leave everyone paralysed. This proved to be useful for community managers of the central EC accounts in replying adequately to comments. Overall, this internal coordination work was complementary to the RAS, which also facilitated collaboration and situational awareness among Member States, as well as discussion specifically about response options for foreign information manipulation and interference.

On the quantitative side, work is still ongoing. The sheer volume of material in the infodemic means that we are constantly presented with moving targets and it is hard to work out which narratives are having the most impact and, therefore, warrant attention. Nevertheless, we are making progress in this field with a combination of automated and human intelligence methods.

5.9   Lessons Learnt

- *Teamwork Needs Structures*
  From these new 'official' working methods, unofficial and often very effective personal connections were forged. These were often more important than the official coordination structures. Yet, without these structures, these relationships would not have flourished. Thanks to these interactions, very fast and flexible reactions could be determined among teams, especially in moments of sudden change such as the emergence of new variants or concerning new mis- and disinformation narratives.

- *Situational Awareness*
  It proved to be very beneficial to have an instrument to pool open-source intelligence that could then be shared among all teams. For us, it was a weekly report, but developing some other equivalent instrument would be valuable in similar situations.

- *Clear Leadership*

Combatting mis- and disinformation is seldom as black and white as correcting wrong information. Harmful narratives are often effective not just because of their false content but because of how they leverage social and cultural discontent, often political in nature. Clear political leadership is needed to define what counter-narratives are appropriate when the damage goes beyond simply whether a claim is true or false.

- *Realism*

Public communication focused on the promise of herd immunity with 70% vaccination coverage. This created a problem for managing expectations when the milestone was reached, but the crisis did not show signs of subsiding.

- *Internal/External Nexus*

In many cases, stories would emerge outside EU countries but quickly become prevalent within the EU. This meant that in practice, very close coordination was needed between the Commission and EEAS. In a national context, this would require cooperation between a foreign ministry and a health ministry, as well as a central coordinating body. Breaking down silos in order to deal with such transversal issues is crucial.

- *Empowering Interdisciplinary Work*

Such collaboration not only needs to be facilitated but empowered so that mandates can be issued for joint projects where necessary. This can pose institutional complications when policy competences are strictly divided. This is what our mandate for the 'Network against Disinformation' attempted to overcome. Working out a framework for such collaboration is important before a crisis hits.

5.10   Conclusion

Overall, we can say that while our work is not over, the infodemic prompted deeper thinking about how we organise proactive and strategic communications and make ourselves resilient in the face of overwhelming threats. For the EU, vaccine-related mis- and disinformation not only struck at the core of its fast developing role in pandemic management, it also hit an institutional soft spot in the space between regulation and fighting external information manipulation and interference. The need for quick and coordinated large-scale reactions prompted the Commission to streamline internal processes to enhance collaboration for quicker and more targeted responses. In this way, our otherwise separate teams were able to exceed the sum of their parts in fighting this overwhelming threat. The solution of the upgraded Network facilitated this outcome by making better use of existing resources and building situational awareness through better pooling of knowledge across departments.

Undoubtedly, even more is needed in order to meet a threat of this scale that is also constantly evolving. However, as is also evident from the institutional and policy background in this chapter, there are inherent constraints in what an organisation such as the EU is able to do. So, while we try our best, it is important to keep in mind these limitations and balance them against the importance of other actors such as national administrations and other organisations. Nevertheless, if we acknowledge these constraints and consider the EU's menu of responses to disinformation 2 years on, we can say with confidence that the trial by infodemic has resulted in a more consolidated operation, which makes its already impressive defences more complete and robust. Time will tell how well we are prepared for the next crisis.

References

Butcher P, Neidhardt AH (2020) Fear and Lying in the EU: Fighting disinformation on migration with alternative narratives. Issue paper, European Policy Centre. https://www.epc.eu/content/PDF/2020/Disinformation_on_Migration.pdf

de Figueiredo A, Karafillakis E, Larson HJ (2020) State of vaccine confidence in the EU + UK, 2020: a report for the European Commission. Vaccine confidence project. https://health.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-12/2020_confidence_rep_en_0.pdf

EEAS (2021a) Tackling disinformation: information on the work of the EEAS Strategic Communication division and its task forces (SG.STRAT.2). https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/countering-disinformation/105460/tackling-disinformation-information-work-eeas-strategic-communication-division-and-its-task_en

EEAS (2021b) My friend thinks Bill Gates will microchip humanity. Now what? https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/93863/%E2%80%9Cmy-friend-thinks-bill-gates-will-microchip-humanity%E2%80%9D-now-what_en

EU vs DISINFO (2021) EEAS special report update: short assessment of narratives and disinformation around the COVID-19 pandemic (UPDATE DECEMBER 2020 – APRIL 2021). https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-short-assessment-of-narratives-and-disinformation-around-the-covid-19-pandemic-update-december-2020-april-2021/

EU vs DISINFO (n.d.) Don't be deceived. https://euvsdisinfo.eu/

European Commission (2018a) Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council. The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Action Plan against Disinformation. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/action_plan_against_disinformation.pdf

European Commission (2018b) European Commission contribution to the European Council Action Plan against disinformation. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/eu-communication-disinformation-euco-05122018_en.pdf

European Commission (2018c) Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52018DC0236

European Commission (2020a) Social media toolkit for healthcare professionals: spreading authoritative information online: #VaccinesWork. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2875/893280

European Commission (2020b) Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council. The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Tackling COVID-19 disinformation – getting the facts right. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-tackling-covid-19-disinformation-getting-facts-right_en.pdf

European Commission (2021) Guidance on Strengthening the Code of Practice on Disinformation | Shaping Europe's digital future. https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/guidance-strengthening-code-practice-disinformation

European Commission (n.d.-a) Fighting disinformation. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation_en

European Commission (n.d.-b) European Democracy Action Plan. https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/european-democracy-action-plan_en

European Commission (n.d.-c) COVID-19 disinformation monitoring | Shaping Europe's digital future. https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/covid-19-disinformation-monitoring

European Council (2015) European Council meeting (19 and 20 March 2015) – conclusions. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21888/european-council-conclusions-19-20-march-2015-en.pdf

European Council (2021) European Council meeting (16 December 2021) – conclusions. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/53575/20211216-euco-conclusions-en.pdf

European Court of Auditors (2021a) The EU's initial contribution to the public health response to COVID-19. https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/RW21_01/RW_public_health_resp_Covid-19_EN.pdf

European Court of Auditors (2021b) Special report 09/2021: disinformation affecting the EU: tackled but not tamed. https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eca/special-reports/disinformation-9-2021/en/

European Union (n.d.) Spot and fight disinformation. https://europa.eu/learning-corner/spot-and-fight-disinformation_en

Joint Statement of the Members of the European Council (2020). https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/43076/26-vc-euco-statement-en.pdf?_sm_au_=iVVk7LQ6HLNTs0R5VkFHNKt0jRsMJ

Lewandowsky S, Cook J, Ecker UKH, Albarracín D, Amazeen MA, Kendeou P, Lombardi D, Newman EJ, Pennycook G, Porter E, Rand DG, Rapp DN, Reifler J, Roozenbeek J, Schmid P, Seifert CM, Sinatra GM, Swire-Thompson B, van der Linden S, Vraga EK, Wood TJ, Zaragoza MS (2020) The debunking handbook 2020. https://www.climatechangecommunication.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/DebunkingHandbook2020.pdf

World Health Organization (2021) Infodemic. https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab_1