Code of Practice on Disinformation – Report of Democracy Reporting International for the period January – September 2024

Democracy Reporting International's (DRI) Digital Democracy Programme Unit focuses on identifying trends in online discourse and online harms during political events and electoral periods across Europe and beyond. Our Digital Democracy team conducts social media monitoring and formulates policy recommendations for various stakeholders in the technology and society ecosystem, including lawmakers, tech platforms, and civil society organizations.

During the monitoring of the 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections, DRI identified several critical threats, including impersonation and inauthentic political accounts on TikTok, misinformation by chatbots, and toxic political speech. Our work centred on collaboration with stakeholders, raising awareness, and mitigating these risks.

- **Impersonation and Inauthentic TikTok Accounts:**

DRI flagged 116 "murky accounts" with questionable affiliations, primarily supporting far-right political figures. These accounts undermined electoral integrity by misleading users and bypassing platform policies. TikTok removed 53 accounts following our reports. We engaged directly with TikTok and recommended changes to their community guidelines as well as improving their enforcement measures.

- **Misinformation via Chatbots and Generative AI:**

DRI conducted a comprehensive study on the reliability of chatbots like ChatGPT and Gemini in providing election-related information. Findings revealed that chatbots frequently delivered inaccurate or incomplete information. We shared findings with relevant firms. Google adjusted its Gemini chatbot. We also investigated the use of generative AI in political campaigns, which was usually not labelled, with further analysis on its implications.

- **Toxicity in Political Speech:**

DRI monitored online political discourse in European elections in eight member states on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, X, WhatsApp, and TikTok. Our analyses offered critical insights into the nature of online political discourse, reflecting national narratives and different levels of toxicity and manipulation that shaped the campaigning across EU, with a specific focus on the campaigns of AfD and Rassemblement National.

Mitigations:

- We provided the European Commission with evidence for enforcement processes, especially around generative AI policies.
- DRI called on platforms like TikTok to revise their community guidelines, improve impersonation safeguards, and enforce stricter policies on political accounts.
- We shared our findings with CoP working groups on elections and generative AI members and raised public awareness through webinars, roundtables, and collaborative events, ensuring key stakeholders remained informed of potential risks as well as media engagements

Our efforts concluded with a post-election review, analysing how online campaigns evolved, which political actors were influential, and how AI technologies impacted the electoral process.

Guidelines for filling out the report

Crisis and elections reporting template

Relevant signatories are asked to provide proportionate and appropriate information and data during a period of crisis and during an election. Reporting is a part of a special chapter at the end of the harmonised reporting template and should follow the guidelines:

- The reporting of signatories' actions should be as specific to the particular crisis or election reported on as possible. To this extent, the rows on "Specific Action[s]" should be filled in with actions that are either put in place specifically for a particular event (for example a media literacy campaign on disinformation related to the Ukraine war, an information panel for the European elections), or to explain in more detail how an action that forms part of the service's general approach to implementing the Code is implemented in the specific context of the crisis or election reported on (for example, what types of narratives in a particular election/crisis would fall into scope of a particular policy of the service, what forms of advertising are ineligible).
- Signatories who are not offering very large online platform services and who follow the invitation to report on their specific actions for a particular election or crisis may adapt the reporting template as follows:
  - They may remove the "Policies and Terms and Conditions" section of the template, or use it to report on any important changes in their internal rules applicable to a particular election or crisis (for example, a change in editorial guidelines for fact-checkers specific to the particular election or crisis)
  - They may remove any Chapter Section of the Reporting Template (Scrutiny of Ads Placement, Political Advertising, Integrity of Services etc.) that is not relevant to their activities
- The harmonised reporting template should be filled in by adding additional rows for each item reported on. This means that rather than combined/bulk reporting such as "Depending on severity of violation, we demote or remove content based on policies X, Y, Z", there should be individual rows stating for example "Under Policy X, content is demoted or removed based on severity", "Under Policy Y, content […]" etc.
- The rows should be colour-coded to indicate which service is being reported on, using the same colour code as for the overall harmonised reporting template.

Reporting should be brief and to the point, with a suggested character limit entry of 2000 characters.

Uploading data to the Transparency Centre

The reports should be submitted to the Commission in the form of the pdf via e-mail to the address CNECT COP TASK FORCE CNECT-COP-TASK-FORCE@ec.europa.eu within the agreed deadline. Signatories will upload all data from the harmonised reporting template to the Transparency Centre, allowing easy data access and filtering within the agreed deadline. It is the responsibility of the signatories to ensure that the uploading takes place and is executed on time. Signatories are also responsible to ensure that the Transparency Centre is operational and functional by the time of the reports' submission that the data from the reports are uploaded and made accessible in the Transparency Centre within the above deadline, and that users are able to read, search, filer and download data as needed in a user-friendly way and format.

2024 European Parliament Elections

Threats observed during the electoral period:

1. **Murky accounts: impersonation and inauthentic TikTok political accounts**

DRI submitted the first RRS notification under the newly created system drawing TikTok's attention to "murky accounts", a term we coined for accounts with unclear affiliations and questionable authenticity actively distributing and promoting politician and party content ahead of the EP and French snap Elections. Between May and July, we sent four RRS notifications flagging 116 TikTok accounts from 31 candidates/political parties across 15 EU member states. We looked at accounts supporting parties from across the political spectrum. 79.31% of the flagged accounts supported far-right candidates and political parties. As of September 2024, TikTok had removed 53 out of the 116 accounts we flagged.

- [Fourth report: Impersonation and inauthentic TikTok Accounts (French Elections)](#) | **04.07.2024**
- [TikTok accounts with unclear affiliation supporting political parties and political candidates in the EU](#) | **11.06.2024**
- [Disinformation Concern: Inauthentic TikTok Accounts that Support Political Parties](#) | **24.05.2024**
- [Inauthentic Behaviour on TikTok - Concerning Accounts Supporting the AfD and Rassemblement National](#) | **07.05.2024**

2. **Chatbots misinforming about the EP Elections, and prevalence of generative AI in the campaign**

After asking four chatbots ten questions in ten different EU languages (a total of 400 questions), DRI showed that chatbots are less reliable than search engines in providing users with electoral information. We asked ChatGPT 3.5 & 4, CoPilot and Gemini common questions about the European elections and all of them provided some totally or partially incorrect answers. This research brief was covered by Politico and Euronews, as well as other outlets. A follow-up study showed that Google adapted its Gemini chatbot which refused to answer election-related questions instead of giving wrong responses. The chatbots of OpenAI and Microsoft continued to provide wrong responses. We also examined the use of generative AI in political campaigns across eight EU countries.

- [When Misinformation Becomes Disinformation: Chatbot Companies and EU Elections](#) | **07.06.2024**
- [Are Chatbots Misinforming Us About the European Elections? Yes.](#) | **11.04.2024**
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3. **Toxicity in political speech, disinformation narratives, and far-right online campaigning**

DRI monitored social media ahead of the European elections to track trends in online debates and identify country-specific instances of toxic content, disinformation, and manipulation. Through our Social Media Monitoring Hub, eight researchers analysed posts from political figures across Facebook, Instagram, X, and TikTok. We also explored WhatsApp activity across German public groups during the months leading up to the elections and examined political campaigns by AfD and RN on X. Our findings were shared via an interactive dashboard, three election briefs, and a final report.

- [Local Insights, European Trends: Case Studies on Digital Discourse in the 2024 EP Elections](#) | **13.08.2024**
- [AfD v. RN: A Comparative Analysis of Far-Right Political Campaigning on X](#) | **12.07.2024**

- [From Engagement to Enmity: Toxicity and Key Narratives in EP Elections 2024](#) | **24.06.2024**
- [Unveiling the Surface: A Snapshot from Political Content on German Public WhatsApp Groups](#) | **04.07.2024**
- [European Parliament Elections 2024, Dashboard](#) | **2024**

Mitigations in place during the electoral period:

- **Provided evidence to enforcement authorities on identified threats**

We provided the European Commission with our research and findings as evidence for ongoing enforcement processes. Specifically, we shared our chatbot audits to support investigations into VLOPs and VLOSEs regarding their policies and enforcement of regulations on generative AI.

- **Urged platforms to revise and strengthen their terms and conditions to effectively combat the identified threats.**

DRI published a brief elaborating on the policy implications of impersonation and inauthentic political accounts on TikTok, highlighting their threat to civic discourse and EU elections by misleading voters, distorting perceptions of support, and bypassing TikTok's stricter policies on political accounts. We recommended that TikTok and other VLOPs update their policies to prevent fan account abuse, implement features to stop impersonation, mandate verified badges for political accounts in the EU, conduct pre-election reviews, and ensure consistent enforcement of guidelines. Following the brief, we met with TikTok representatives in Berlin on 12 August to discuss our findings and recommendations.

- [The big loophole (and how to close it: How TikTok's policy and practice invites murky political accounts|](#) **22.07.2024**

- **Raised awareness about threats and built networks with relevant stakeholders through webinars and roundtables**

Throughout our monitoring of the EP elections, we worked closely with key stakeholders. A key initiative was establishing the Social Media Monitoring Hub, staffed by eight researchers from France, Germany, Spain, Poland, Hungary, Italy, Sweden, and Romania, to track relevant country-specific issues and online threats in the months leading up to the election. We also raised public awareness about these threats through webinars and events. In April, DRI organised a 90-minute online exchange with 34 participants from EU institutions, platforms, and NGOs to assess risks ahead of the European Parliament elections. Breakout groups discussed emerging online threats, sharing insights and identifying potential risks. We continued these efforts with a post-election webinar to review how campaigns unfolded, identify opinion leaders, and explore the use of generative AI in the elections.

- [Separating Voice from Noise: Insights from the 2024 EP Elections](#) | **24.06.2024**
- [Anticipating the Storm: Mapping Digital Threats to the 2024 European Parliament Elections](#) | **18.04.2024**
- [DRI is Investigating Online Political Posts Surrounding the 2024 EU Elections](#) | **25.04.2024**
- [Wie war das mit Desinformation bei der Europawahl?](#) **FAZ, 6.07.2024**