

# PROCEEDINGS OF THE EUROPEAN MEDIA AND INFORMATION FUND'S FIRST ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation

Lisbon, 2 December 2022

On the 2nd of December 2022, the European Media and Information Fund (EMIF) hosted its first annual conference at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon.

## *Welcome*

The program started with words of welcome from Mr. António Feijo (President of the Board of Trustees of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation) and Mr. Lauri Tierala (Program Director of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), EUI).

Mr. Feijo mentioned EMIF's four main objectives of supporting fact-checking, multidisciplinary investigations of disinformation, research and media literacy initiatives across the European Union. He underlined the importance of these activities in order to counter the many challenges posed by disinformation, and to promote a more transparent and resilient information ecosystem in Europe. During its first year of operations, EMIF has already supported 33 projects, with €5.75 million committed so far. These projects were made possible by the €25 million contribution from Google to EMIF, for which Mr. Feijo expressed his gratitude.

Mr. Tierala expressed his gratitude to the grantees. Their experiences, and the nature and quality of the proposals submitted to EMIF, indicate the need for the activities that the Fund has set as its objectives. It is now time to look at challenges that Europe may face in the future and to ensure that EMIF's upcoming calls meet those challenges, informed by scientific guidance that EDMO will continue to provide. He concluded by inviting all participants to actively participate in the debate, as this will help identify relevant priorities for future funding activities.

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## *Keynote Speech*

The keynote speech was delivered by the European Commission's Vice-President Věra Jourová (Values and Transparency), who mentioned the significant challenge that disinformation poses to our information environment. Russia's conventional military invasion of Ukraine earlier this year is compounded by an information war that leverages false and misleading narratives to sow division and fear in societies and undermine democratic states. This cannot be allowed to happen, but the response must be made the European way, with full respect for human rights and freedoms. Better situational awareness of disinformation actors, their actions and the vulnerabilities that they exploit is needed. This requires a pool of expertise to be built, for which EDMO offers a good foundation.

The battle against disinformation also requires the cooperation of online media platforms, which are an active battleground in this conflict. Their efforts so far are acknowledged, but cooperation needs to be reinforced, and further action by these platforms must be encouraged. Here, the 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation and the Digital Services Act lead the way.

Combating disinformation is just one side of the coin. It is also necessary to identify trustworthy sources of information, increase transparency of media ownership, and to protect journalists. The recently adopted proposal for a European Media Freedom Act represents a key step forward in this direction. Clear guidelines for governing bodies, and stable funding for media that abide by clear, independent editorial standards are also necessary.

In addition to these three strands of action, Vice-President Jourová recalled that, in the context of the European State of the Union, the Commission announced a new package of measures aimed at addressing foreign interferences and exposing malign actors that try to influence public opinion within the EU.

## *Presentation of EMIF's Annual Report*

The EMIF Annual Report was presented by Mr. Luís Madureira Pires (Chair of the Management Committee, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation) and Mr. Paolo Cesarini (Member of the Management Committee, European University Institute).

Mr. Madureira Pires expressed his gratitude for so many active members in this community who are fighting against disinformation. EMIF's Annual Report demonstrates the role that the Fund plays in combating disinformation, and this role will continue to grow in the future. The Fund was launched with four guiding principles in mind: collaboration, transparency, efficiency and prevention of any conflict of interest. During the past year, the first projects from grantees were approved, funded and implemented, but it is still too early to assess the full impact of their work. The calls for projects were envisioned to have geographic diversity, with projects coming from at least twelve countries. That objective was surpassed this year with projects covering a total of twenty-one countries. Fact-checking projects are often smaller in scope and shorter in duration, to allow for rapid, agile response to emerging needs. Proposals for multidisciplinary investigations were of good quality, but in smaller number than envisioned, while there has been a strong uptick of funding for media literacy initiatives. In the future, EMIF will grow and build upon these past activities.

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Mr. Cesarini welcomed the robust stakeholders' participation to the calls launched by EMIF in its first year of operations, noting that 108 proposals across all intervention areas were submitted, out of which 33 could be funded on the basis of the allocated annual budget. He then outlined the possible directions for the future. Fact-checking, multidisciplinary investigations of disinformation, research and media literacy will remain the main focus, but specific further support should be provided for capacity building efforts, new skills, and research enabling the development of pre-emptive approaches to disinformation threats, including specific predictive models. Current knowledge of the mechanisms that shape the spread of disinformation is still limited, as we are facing threats that are constantly changing and evolving. While media literacy efforts should be scaled up, an important focus area should be the production of case-specific investigations and situational analyses, looking at the actors, vectors and targets of disinformation campaigns across geographies and topics. Ambitions for future funding include broadening the geographic scope of EMIF's activities, expanding the number of funding partners, and entering into partnerships with like-minded philanthropic organisations to encompass support for news media and quality journalism.

### *Presentation of the EMIF Assessment Report*

The EMIF Assessment Report was presented by Mr. Max von Abendroth, Chair of the Philanthropy in PPPs Forum, and external reviewer of EMIF's first year of activities, from 25 March 2021 to 24 March 2022. The report was delivered on 30 November 2022.

Mr. von Abendroth presented four main findings from the report. Firstly, he noted that independence and absence of conflict of interest are ensured, through appropriate declarations of independence by all parties involved. The initial contributor to the Fund (Google) is not involved in any decision-making, nor profits from any findings obtained by grantees. EDMO advises the Fund in full independence. Secondly he observed that both institutions (the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and the European University Institute) have a reputation of excellence and guarantee a high level of professionalism. Thirdly he commended the large geographical outreach of EMIF's funding actions and the wide of range applicants, well above the planned targets. Finally, he pointed out that EMIF plays an important role in community building in the disinformation space, and it is well positioned to do so.

Building on these observations, Mr. von Abendroth concluded with four recommendations for the future:

1. Diversify the range of donors, which will contribute to the Fund's independence and strengthen its role of community-builder.
2. Complete EMIF's governance structure, which includes establishing a Steering Committee.
3. EMIF's local impact can be increased through a multi-stakeholder partnership approach, by interacting with relevant partners across the ecosystem.
4. Achieve gender-balance. The Fund should think on ways to further diversify its workforce and how to apply gender-balance criteria in future calls.

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## *EMIF's Impact: Meet our Grantees*

Some of EMIF's current grantees presented the projects that they developed with the Fund's support.

Ms. Kamila Buchalska and Ms. Miłada Jędrzyk from OKO.Press, a Polish fact-checking and investigative journalism portal, described their efforts to fact-check and dispel false information, the tools to do so, and the challenges involved in reaching and persuading skeptical and/or diverse audiences. To achieve these goals, diverse strategies are required, which should be developed with the characteristics of each audience in mind. There is no one-size-fits-all solution.

Helena Soares and Javier Luque from the International Press Institute, who presented their work on exposing the disinformation playbook through the study of smear campaigns and harassment of journalists. By analyzing case studies from Germany, Austria and Croatia, and findings from a cross-EU survey (forthcoming), they attempt to establish why the targets for such campaigns are chosen, how they are harassed and trust from audiences is eroded, as well as the strategies the harassers employ. Their findings create a blueprint of harassment campaigns that they will use to develop a series of trainings for newsrooms, freelancers and trainers.

Mr. Bret Schafer and Mr. Ansgar Gessner presented 'The Disinformation Laundromat', a joint project from four partners: the German Marshall Fund, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), the University of Amsterdam (UvA) and Alethea Group. Based on the hypothesis that laundering disinformation to introduce it into the information ecosystem works similarly to money laundering, by using proxies and mirror websites to hide the initiators of a disinformation campaign, this project intends to create an open source tool to identify networks of mirror and proxy websites. Development and testing of the tool will feature prominently in several sessions of the University of Amsterdam's Digital Methods Schools.

This presentation was followed by the MIC-MAC project from Mr. Joe Cullen and Ms. Maria Ana Carneiro (Associação Godinhela). This project enhances the media and information literacy skills of educators who work with vulnerable learners, by adapting learning materials to the lived experiences of the learners. The project aims to develop a media and information literacy competence framework and a training model for educators, which is converted into an online training program for 200 educators and learners, as well as a toolkit to support the replication, adaptation and sustainability of MIC-MAC.

The session concluded with Ms. Delphine Ramond (Agence France-Presse (AFP)) and Ms. Nataliia Kostina (Ukrinform), who presented their training program for Ukrinform, Ukraine's biggest and oldest news agency. Their project, which had its launch in September 2022, provides training, from AFP and the Austria Press Agency (APA), and training materials to journalist to develop their fact-checking capabilities and extend their reach. This can aid in dispelling lies in the current information war, but also beyond, to the issue of disinformation at large. In every fact-check, you can identify the manner in which disinformation is spread.

## *Future of the fight against information disorder: identifying gaps and defining priorities*

This panel was chaired by Mr. Paolo Cesarini, and featured Mr. Alberto Rabbachin (Deputy Head of Unit, DG CONNECT, European Commission), Ms. Tania de Moraes Soares (Head of Media Analysis Department of the Portuguese Media Regulatory Authority (ERC)), Ms. Dominika Hajdu (Policy Director, Centre for Democracy & Resilience, GLOBSEC) and Mr. Claes de Vreese (Distinguished Professor and Chair of Political Communication, University of Amsterdam) as panelists.

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Mr. Cesarini opened the panel by mentioning the newly adopted Digital Services Act, and the strengthened 2022 Code of Practice against Disinformation. He stressed that the panel was a good opportunity to look at intervention areas where EMIF should focus its attention for the next year(s).

Ms. Morais Soares mentioned the challenges of adapting national legislation to new and changing realities. She raised the issue of how national legislators and regulators can supervise big online platforms, and how to integrate and harmonize legislation and regulations on European and national levels, whilst avoiding issues like a lack of responsibility in certain areas due to overlapping responsibilities. She stressed that it is important to support journalism and to develop media-literacy, but also to keep in mind the limits of certain efforts such as fact-checking. New anti-disinformation measures should not harm fundamental rights and freedom of expression.

Mr. Rabbachin focused on the revised Code of Practice on Disinformation, which is a significant step forward in terms of commitments and number of signatories. He stressed that what is needed now is the elaboration of structural indicators, i.e. an approach to measure the impact of the disinformation campaigns on different audiences, and the effectiveness of the measures taken by signatories under the Code. This is a research area that the EMIF's calls could help develop. Another area worth monitoring is the flow of advertising money towards disinformation websites, and the impact of the commitments subscribed to by online platforms and the advertising industry to demonetize disinformation actors, and to reject advertisements conveying disinformation. Finally he noted that the Code makes new data available to researchers, which some of the upcoming projects could use to address these issues.

Ms. Hajdu mentioned that online platforms will not be able to implement everything that they pledged to do. Actors like non-governmental organizations should play a bigger role and be empowered to monitor the effective implementation of the mitigating measures taken by online platforms. Additionally, more insights into the true scope of disinformation is needed. We need more data on certain platforms like TikTok and Instagram, as well as on certain features such as YouTube content recommendations.

Mr. de Vreese listed five features for future EMIF calls:

1. Anatomy of disinformation: The topic itself is not yet well-identified. What is needed is not just a definition of what it is, but relevant cases, its principles, why and what happens. This needs to be one guiding principle for research.
2. Authenticity: There are many tools available for identifying and tracking offensive content across media, and cheapfakes are more prevalent than well-made deepfakes, but we should be wary of complacency. With new developments in AI in mind, authenticity can be a major issue in the future.
3. Trust-building: This should be front and center, also to create balance in our focus. For example, how can we leverage and improve existing trust in societies?
4. Comparative contentious issues: We have seen discussions going from Covid, to climate, to war. There are assumptions that the actors who are monetizing this content, and the citizens who are absorbing this content, are largely similar. Mr. de Vreese is not convinced that this is actually correct, and more research should be done on this phenomenon.
5. Data availability: More data may have been made available through the new Code, but this has not yet been put to the test. Some projects can try to utilize these new opportunities.

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The discussion with the audience highlighted the issue of temporal and monetary costs involved with analyzing and debunking video content. It was suggested that specific support should be provided to research in this area. In particular, it was suggested to develop a reliable tool that can be used on audiovisual content in any language from within the European Union, as well as cooperation between fact-checkers within Europe to resolve these issues. EMIF's calls could help foster community-building.

Another issue raised was that skills and networks that have been built up during projects are lost once funding comes to an end. Sustainability and transferability should feature more prominently in EMIF's future considerations. Moreover, projects from different regions and languages may have similar objectives, but cannot interact due to these differences. EMIF could help bring those together. On a more general note, it was observed that the manner in which regulations affect media differs from country to country. Autocratic countries can and will abuse these regulations to restrict media freedom.

### *How to support independent research to fight disinformation in the media ecosystem*

The final panel of the day was chaired by Ms. Joanna Krawczyk (member of the EMIF Management Committee) and featured Mr. Alexandre Alaphilippe (Executive Director and Co-Founder of EU DisinfoLab), Ms. Helena Martins (Public Policy and Government Relations Lead at Google Portugal), Mr. Miguel Castro (Deputy Director Program Communications & Global Media Partnerships at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation) and Mr. Radovan Geist (Co-Founder and Publisher of EURACTIV Slovakia) as panelists.

Ms. Krawczyk opened the panel by mentioning the decline of press freedom worldwide, including Europe. Moreover, digitalization has disrupted the traditional business model of the news media industry, which has led to a decline in the number of traditional media outlets. What is left needs to do more with less resources, and has to compete with new actors in the digital information space. Since technology platforms take the largest share of advertising revenues, traditional media are turning to funding from other parties. This is complex situation is compounded by information disorder, which affects social cohesion and trust in journalism. In spite of these many challenges, there have never been more opportunities for progress. In addition to the EU Media Action Plan, several corporate programs, including those supported by large platforms, offer the opportunity to bring corporate, philanthropic and governmental support together.

Ms. Martins emphasized Google's commitment to supporting media plurality and to making information available to all. The company's donations to the Fund, and to media at large, come from this broader mission, which rests on three pillars. The first pillar consists of providing quality information to users, by making changes to algorithms and prioritizing results from reputable sources, whilst working with fact-checkers. The second pillar is about fighting bad actors who want to use the platform's tools and reach to spread disinformation. The third pillar is working with the ecosystem. Disinformation is a multi-faceted, intersocietal problem that technology companies cannot solve by themselves, but only in cooperation with governments and civil society. Google and YouTube have pledged \$13.2 million to support international fact-checkers, with an open call scheduled for 2023. The platform funds new technology to help fact-checkers with reaching wider audiences. A specific fund has been created to support civil society organizations in Central and Eastern Europe.

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Mr. Castro remarked that it is difficult to define something as large as philanthropy, since there are American, European, African and Asian contexts to consider. However, there is one common denominator: helping each other. Compared to ten years ago, philanthropy has moved from mainly art-focused to a larger societal focus, particularly after the decline of the welfare state in Europe. This new focus includes the fight against disinformation and funding for news media. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation tries address market failure affecting the news ecosystem. The Foundation intervenes there where its investments can make the bigger impact. What makes it different from other foundations, is that it does not just fund non-profit organizations, but also some for-profit media organizations.

Mr. Alaphilippe stressed two points. Firstly, how can civil society perform its tasks of monitoring and advocacy? Secondly, considering that many European organizations in this sector are funded by philanthropic organizations mainly established in the United States and the United Kingdom, how can these activities be funded from within the EU? Civil society organizations have been cutting costs, including staff, so expertise is lost to technology firms and governments. Much funding is allocated for one year-terms, which is not sustainable to retain long-term expertise. For example, large amounts of funding were spent on Covid expertise, but now the funding goes to the war in Ukraine. What happens to that medical expertise now? This is not the proper way to build an ecosystem. There is innovation in the EU, and there are fantastic outlets, but we are not at the level where we claim to be. Regulations are coming in, but they need to be enforced. Supporting civil society requires a long-term strategy and a more ambitious commitment from Europe.

Mr. Geist asked how money spent to counter disinformation can be made impactful and efficient. In his view, investments should at least match the budget that Russia allocates for its disinformation activities. He raised in particular two issues. Firstly, how can we sustain quality media? Secondly, how can we use fact-checking in a sustainable way (trusted by readers, integrated in the media world, and economically sustainable)? To address these issues, he put forward the following suggestions. Firstly, increase the number of initiatives that fund fact-checking and create means of coordination. Secondly, allow for many different media, reflecting the wide variety and diversity of media. Thirdly, foster multi-disciplinarity and different types of actors (media, NGO, etc.). And lastly, help develop new business models, as there are many forms of innovation, not just technological.

The discussion with the audience raised the issue of that current funding for fact-checking initiatives, including that from corporations, is spread out over a large sector and should be increased. Another suggestion was to discuss issues such as the means to support organizations closer to people, especially those that help vulnerable groups. Try to move beyond 'exciting' and 'new', to 'persistence' and 'perseverance'.

### *Closing remarks*

The closing remarks were delivered by Mr. Miguel Poiares Maduro (Chair of the Executive Board of EDMO).

Mr. Poiares Maduro thanked all participants. He remarked on the changes in the information landscape and the challenges that they pose. New forms of funding are needed to support media and the fight against disinformation, whilst attempts at influence and interference by political or other actors through such funding should be prevented. This is the reason why organizations such as EMIF are important, for they can act as mediators between funders and stakeholders in the ecosystem. Disinformation itself is not a new phenomenon, but the digital transformation has changed the way in which it affects us all, through changes in the scale and speed of information, and in the editorial process. Algorithms follow different standards than traditional journalists. These changes challenge

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democracy cognitively and epistemologically and make it more difficult to reconcile political differences. To face this challenge, it is important to strengthen regulatory instruments, improve the resilience of journalism and traditional media, and to support all those who fight disinformation. It is EDMO's role to bring actors from the media and counter-disinformation communities together. EMIF is crucial for establishing financial support, in order to raise the scale of these actors, and to promote the emergence of new actors. EDMO is looking forward to enhanced cooperation with EMIF in the future.

The European Media and Information Fund thanks the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Google LLC, the grantees and guest speakers, as well as all other participants for a fruitful and interesting conference. We hope to welcome you all again next year.

Calls for proposals will open late January 2023.

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