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Why fighting disinformation is increasingly important and how AI4Debunk can contribute?

Uniting European forces against disinformation

In January 2024, an interdisciplinary consortium of eight European countries launched a project to fight disinformation, fake news and foreign interference. Funded by the European Union (EU) through the Horizon Europe Programme, the research project, AI4Debunk, brings together political scientists, sociologists, journalists and computer science experts to achieve an ambitious goal: debunk disinformation and fake news. To achieve this goal, the international consortium will elaborate trustworthy online activity to provide citizens with efficient Artificial Intelligence (AI)-powered tools.

The issue of disinformation, fake news and propaganda has been a dominant theme in the headlines for several years. The COVID-19 crisis became a test case, showing that the effectiveness of how the EU and its democratic societies deal with disinformation and destructive propaganda remains rather low. Since Russia's invasion in Ukraine, in parallel with individual country efforts, the European Commission (EC) and other international organisations have undertaken fact-checking and debunking activities to counter Russia's massive propaganda and disinformation. Summarising the EU experience and response to the threat posed by disinformation, fake news and foreign influence, one can conclude that there has been a significant gap between the response by the EU and the disinformation impact on the minds of the Europeans and the stability of the EU during the COVID-19 crisis. This gap has been narrowed by the EU's response to the war in Ukraine. The emotional reaction of the Europeans to the war in Europe forged an unprecedented unity within the EU.



However, the “war fatigue” challenges people’s abilities to distinguish truth from lies, especially as the disinformation is getting more massive, particularly during the pre-election campaign in the EU.

We remember the horrible consequences that the Covid-19 virus left on people’s health. The disinformation, or infodemic, is comparable to a deadly virus as it leaves a devastating effect on people’s minds. Infodemic is a term that blends information and epidemic, referring to the rapid spread of information — both accurate and inaccurate — in the age of the internet and social media. What exactly does infodemic mean? In my view, infodemic means a mixture of facts and conspiracy theories, speculations and rumours, amplified and relayed worldwide by modern information technologies, which have affected the EU and global economies, politics and security in ways that are utterly disproportionate with the root realities. It is a phenomenon which we have observed with a growing frequency in recent years. Disinformation provoke racist and xenophobic sentiments, lead to general anxiety and polarisation of society, and create social unrest and public violence (David Rothkopf, The Washington Post, 11 May 2023).

The EU is increasingly engaged in the war of information and global battle of narratives, in which it has to face many powerful opponents. The geo-political component of this infodemic is very challenging as foreign actors like Russia and China are highly experienced in organising toxic disinformation campaigns, using various manipulative techniques and destructive narratives for the “anti-EU” propaganda in their struggle for influence.

AI4Debunk: a multidisciplinary approach

How can we efficiently use AI in fact-checking? I am well-experienced in the field of communication technologies, but my knowledge of AI is limited. Naturally, I am aware that AI is a series of technologies. It is all about machine learning and algorithms. It is about data. I am sure that used in a sensible way, AI is a huge and fantastic opportunity for people to check the quality of information. However, I have many questions to our AI experts. How can we make AI-based tools for debunking disinformation user-friendly? How can we run ahead of technological progress and predict future challenges? Perhaps we should invent pre-bunking disinformation rather than limit ourselves to its debunking? I hope that our international AI-team will be able to answer these and many other questions in the final stage of the project. Yet, I have a very clear opinion on one issue. I am convinced that AI is not going to replace human critical thinking. Therefore, we will closely cooperate with universities to improve the learning process.

I am writing this article after the first two days of face-to-face meetings with the project partners that took place in Riga. I am very proud that the University of Latvia is coordinating the project implementation as the leading institution. I feel excited about the future challenges and our responsibility to make AI4Debunk a success story. The people of Latvia know very well what propaganda and disinformation mean in practice. Many citizens of the older generation, who experienced huge propaganda inflow during the Soviet times, have developed “natural immunity” against fake news.



However, a large part of today's generation have not been trained to distrust public narratives. Therefore, we will be happy to share our historic experiences and unique knowledge of Russia's propaganda machine with our colleagues to enrich the project's findings.

Finally, I would like to share my thoughts that stemmed from AI4Debunk's "warm-up" meeting in the Latvian Parliament on March 12, 2024.

Firstly, even though it is vital to provide citizens with comprehensive facts and figures, is it clearly not enough during hard times. More than ever, the EU must confront cynics and sceptics. European leaders must find a proper combination of facts to override false news and emotional engagement to provide reasons for hope and confidence. Secondly, rooting out disinformation is a crucial goal for the EU. Unfortunately, in the current war of narratives, the EU does not seem convincing in comparison with the infodemic spread by Russia, China and other non-democratic players. I believe that AI4Debunk could improve the EU citizens' resistance to disinformation. Thirdly, the current regulation on AI should be complemented by other means like media literacy, critical thinking, fact-checking, etc.

Despite the "war-fatigue" regarding Russia's ongoing full-scale invasion of Ukraine, evidence-based information in combination with debunking of disinformation should help Europeans maintain their trust in the European project.



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Since September 2011, she served at the European Commission as head of the EC Representation in Rīga. In 2008-2011 she was Director of Social and Information Society Statistics in Eurostat, European Commission, and Director of Economic and Regional Statistics in 2005-2008. From 2001 to 2005, she was Chair of the Latvian Public Utilities Commission in charge of regulation of electricity, gas and telecommunication markets as well as railway and postal services. In 1999-2001, she was Senior Advisor to Executive Director in the International Monetary Fund in Washington DC. From 1991 to 1999, she was Director of Economic Analyses and Fiscal Policy Department in the Latvian Ministry of Finance, and Advisor to Minister of Finance.

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