

European Voices for Healthier Democracies:

Combatting Disinformation,
Misinformation & Fake News



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Contents

ABOUT DEBATING EUROPE	1
INTRODUCTION	2
Focus Group Participants	3
The Findings	5
Key Ideas	6
MAIN CONCERNS ON DISINFORMATION	7
How Much Trust Is Left in Traditional Institutions	12
The Personal Impact of Disinformation	16
How Institutions Can Counter Disinformation	20
CONCLUSIONS	23

About Debating Europe

The platform that lets you discuss YOUR ideas with Europe's leaders

We want to encourage a genuine conversation between Europe's politicians and the citizens they serve – and that means taking YOUR questions, comments and ideas directly to policymakers for them to respond.

Since its launch in 2011, we've taken a bottom-up approach, with the citizens very much in the driving seat of the debate, asking the questions they want answered and putting forward their opinions for politicians and thought-leaders from across the EU to react to. From the start, we've interviewed more than 3,000 policymakers and experts from across the political spectrum. Each has agreed to answer some of the

200,000 comments sent in to us from citizens online, including from 6+ million users since launching, and over 271,000 followers on social media.

To further our growth, we've embarked on an expansion strategy based on the launch of multilingual versions of Debating Europe. The first of which being DebatingEurope/DE, a German language discussion platform modelled after Debating Europe, but aimed squarely at a German-speaking audience.

DebatingEurope is an initiative of Friends of Europe, the Brussels-based think tank for a more sustainable, inclusive and forward-looking Europe.





Introduction

Disinformation (i.e. deliberately deceptive information) and misinformation (i.e. unintentionally false information) threaten social cohesion and increase polarisation and extremism. Citizens feel a sense of exclusion from decision-making processes, look for easy solutions to complex problems and express their frustrations both on-line and offline (sometimes – such as during the 2021 Capitol riot – in ways that put the functioning of healthy democracies at risk).

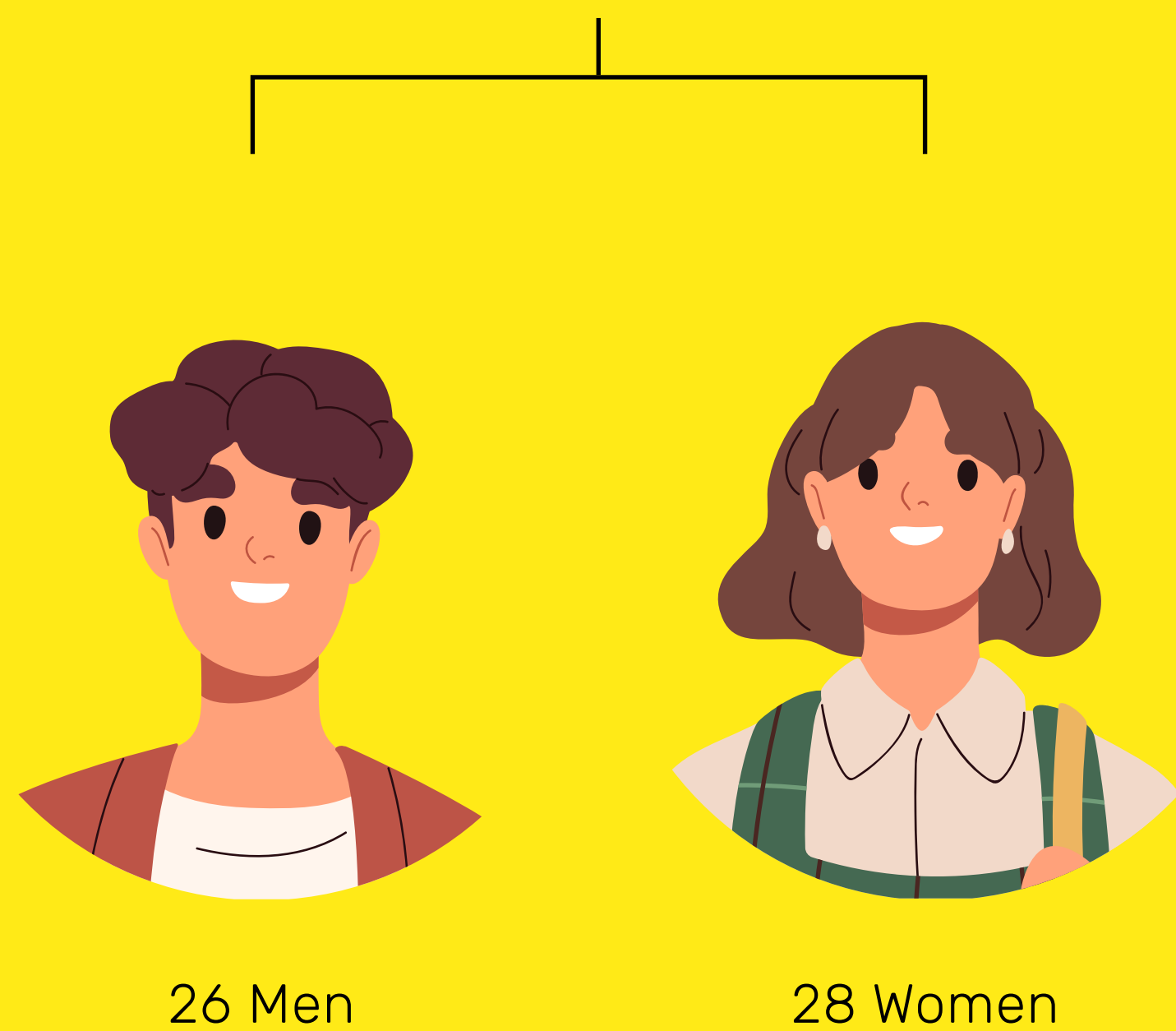
Disinformation has become a security threat, undermining free elections, public security, and public health (as during the COVID-19 pandemic). Cognisant of this challenge, Debating Europe launched a series of focus groups to explore people's attitudes towards disinformation as a threat to democratic institutions, allowing for a deeper and unbiased understanding of the phenomenon.

We canvassed the opinions of Europeans recruited from our community, expressing their opinions on disinformation during a series of online focus groups. Each focus group was 1-hour long and moderated by Debating Europe's team.

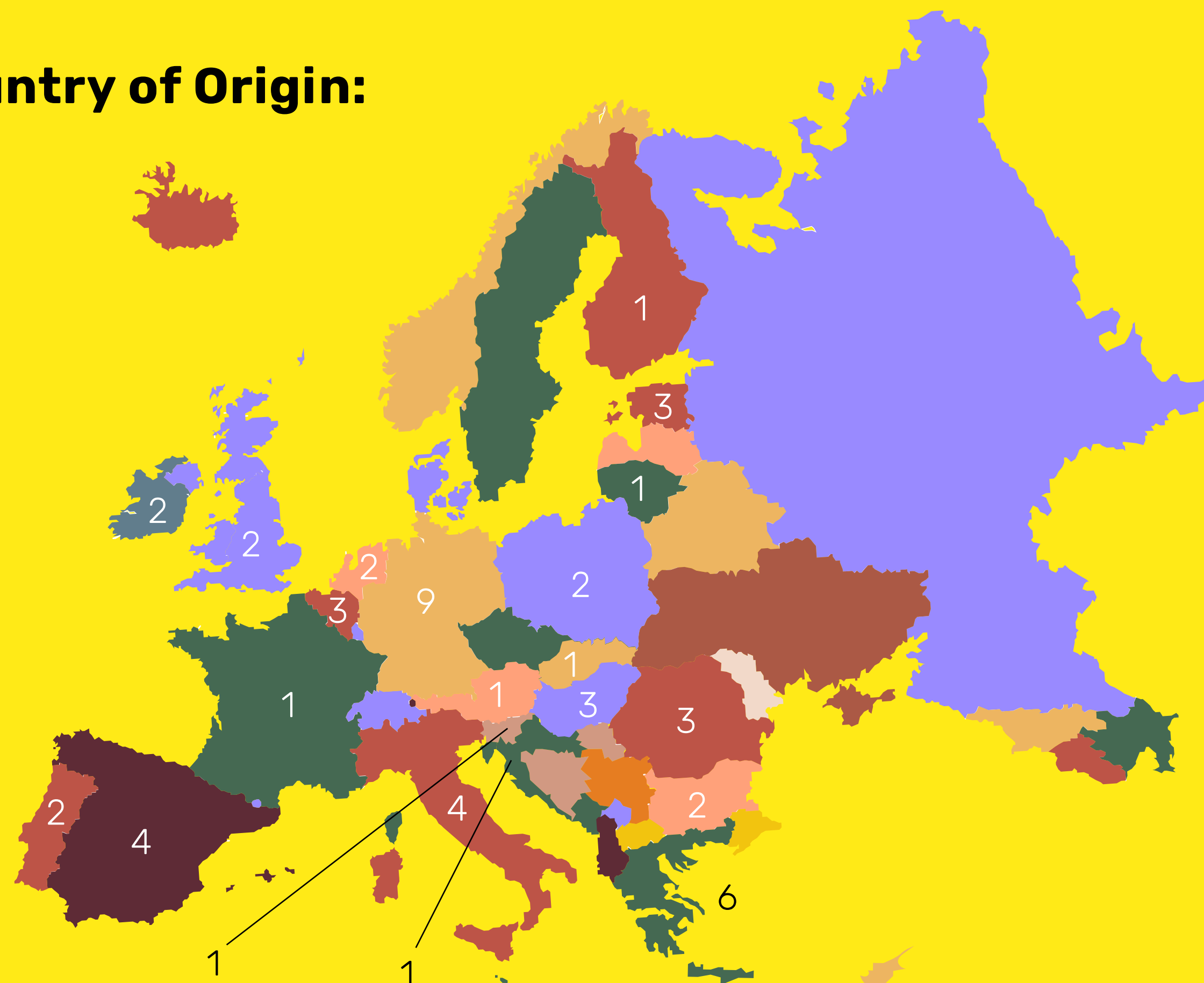
The results of the focus groups are analysed and distilled into this report, capturing the opinions and recommendations of all participants.

Focus Group Participants

**54 Total
Participants**



Country of Origin:



Education:

Postgraduate education (e.g. master’s degree or PhD)	31
Undergraduate education (e.g. bachelor’s degree)	20
Secondary education (e.g. high school / secondary school)	2
Trade / technical / vocational training	1

Where participants get their news from:



Where do participants think fake news are spread:

- 45** Social Media (e.g. Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, etc.)
- 29** News Websites
- 17** Television
- 6** Radio
- 6** Print Media (e.g. newspapers, magazines)



The Findings

The people in our focus groups have been grappling with the flow of false information for a large part of their adult lives. Many were shocked and appalled when Covid-19 conspiracy theories spread online and duped their friends, colleagues and family members. While they singled out social media for criticism, many also felt that governments and traditional media had failed to tackle the issue properly. They want institutions to be more transparent about their finances and their sources of information.

The speed and efficiency of modern technology is a huge concern for Europeans. The participants believed the Covid-19 pandemic supercharged what was already a key facet of human society – the tendency for people to mislead each

other. And they are worried about the ability of vulnerable groups to cope, as well as their own capacity to keep on cross-refencing the material they read.

False information around the pandemic has weighed heavily on traditional institutions. Many of our participants already had trust issues with their governments and media. They felt the pandemic intensified the trends for journalists to fail to check their stories and for governments to mislead for political gain.

Most of the participants have been affected by disinformation or misinformation – whether in false social media posts, manipulative political campaigns or misleading news items. They almost

universally derided social media for allowing bogus stories to spread. But participants also had harsh words for political campaigners and headline writers for enticing audiences with clickbait.

The participants thought hard about how to tackle the spread of false information. Most wanted governments to provide better education, and for media and governments to give clearer details of their sources of information and funding. But there was concern that such initiatives would have limited impact. Ultimately, many questioned whether government action could ever really tackle the problem with some resigned to the idea that individuals would continue to bear the burden.

Key Ideas



1. Look after the vulnerable

Allow information to flow, but raise awareness among older people of the dangers of bogus information



2. Promote reliable resources

Even tech-savvy young people need direction to good quality, official sources



3. Be honest about funding

News outlets can create trust by boosting transparency and being clear about sources



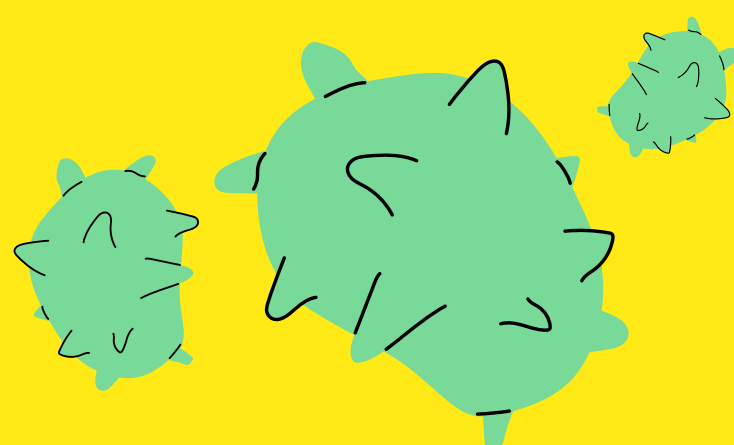
4. EU needs to get involved

The bloc is widely trusted but does not do enough to get messages across on key issues



5. Local information needed

News vacuums have emerged in countries where politicians are seen to control the media



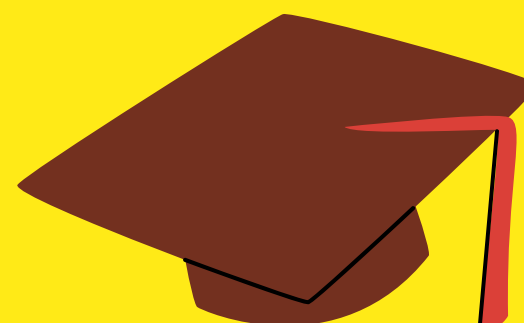
6. Learn pandemic lessons

Conspiracies around vaccines show real-world impact of disinformation and misinformation



7. Nobody is immune

Bogus content is now so slick that even the sharpest readers can be duped



8. Education is key

Long-term investment in media literacy will help youngsters navigate disinformation



9. Politicians can help

Bombarding social media with emotional campaign ads is not helpful



10. Not just social media

Traditional news organisations must do better and avoid republishing bogus information

Main Concerns on Disinformation

While lively debate and strong opinions are at the heart of democratic societies, disinformation and misinformation have historically been closely associated with war propaganda and totalitarian governments.

Yet over the past few years, Europeans feel bombarded by misleading information, spread deliberately or inadvertently.

The participants in our focus groups worried about the business models that underpin these information flows, the technology that enables them, and the capacity of vulnerable groups to cope. Ultimately, they question whether the distinction between truth and lies was still possible.

Covid-19 Supercharged the Flow of False Information

From debates about abortion in Ireland, to the refugee crisis in 2015, to this year's invasion of Ukraine, Europeans have been dealing with bogus information for years. The disinformation and misinformation has come from all sides – false claims made by politicians, inaccurate news reports and viral social media posts.

But the flood that followed the onset of the pandemic was unprecedented in its intensity and its conviction. "I found myself very vulnerable during coronavirus," said Mariavittoria. The media was suddenly a much bigger force in everyone's daily lives and "it was very difficult to



assess real information or fake news”, not only on social media but also on TV.

“In the Covid pandemic, a lot of people fell into the fake news hole and really started to create their own truth,” said Antonia from Germany. “It’s not just believing some facts, but really not trusting anything anymore that comes out of official sources. It’s been getting more and more, it doesn’t stop.”

Vassili from Greece remembers getting a message on social media early in the pandemic advising that people should drink hot beverages because “the virus would die if the temperature was over 25 degrees”. He asked the sender how this could work, as the human body was hotter than 25 degrees. “Of course, I got no response at all, and then a year later some friends were getting the same message, word for word,” he said. “So somehow these things circle around the internet.”

This was just one of the conspiracies highlighted in the focus groups. Others included the idea that the vaccines contained microchips, that PCR tests could not really detect the virus, or that the vaccines would alter human DNA.

Technology Is Fuelling the Spread

The participants pointed out that deception had existed for as long as human societies, but the spread of dis- and misinformation has becoming slicker and quicker in recent years.

“In the Middle Ages, you had to go by horse and read a letter on a public marketplace,” said Muriel from Germany. “Today it’s just a click on the internet and 10 million people can read it.”

“It’s obviously always been an issue – misinformation and fake news, it’s not a new problem,” said Myrto from Greece. “But it’s just right now there’s way more ways to spread misinformation and make it seem more convincing, and we don’t educate people enough on how to spot it and avoid it.”

Erik from Hungary agreed that the problem had been around for centuries, “but the size, the relevance, the amount is totally different than before,” he said. “Just during the last couple of years, we can see an intense growth of fake news this information related to the Covid-19 pandemic and right now the Ukrainian-Russian war.”

“I was a big fan of social media when it was starting years ago, but it starts to scare me more and more

Marta from Poland

It is easy to post outlandish claims on social media and see them spread around the world. Algorithms that promote such posts compound the feeling that life online is a series of bubbles – you see only the content from those whose opinions you agree with, regardless of what is true.

“Everyone lives in the funnel of their own beliefs,” said Anne from the Netherlands. “You only get one side, most of the time,” said Julio from Spain, describing online life as a “rabbit hole” created by algorithms. “You try to get out but you cannot.”

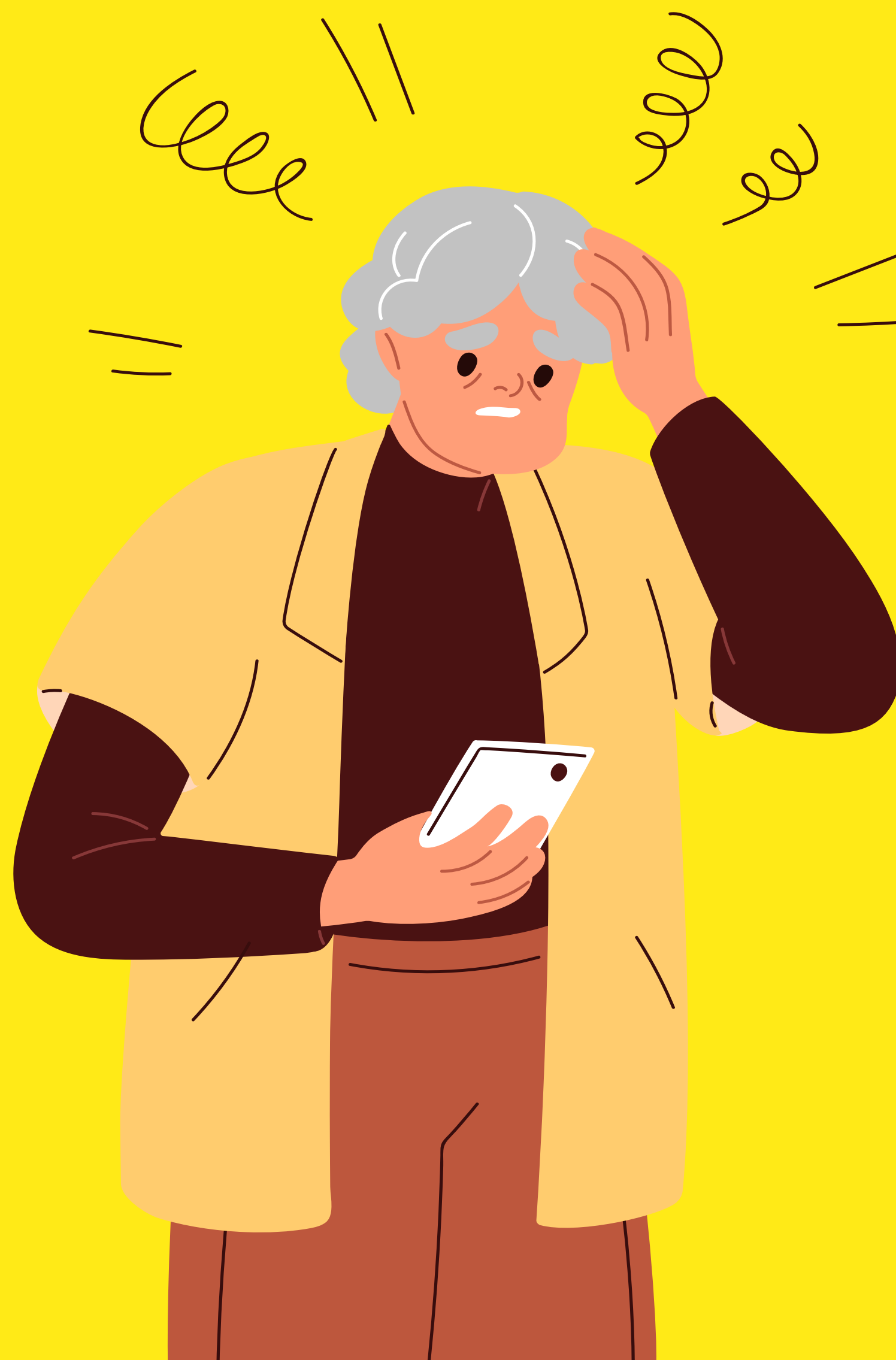
Marta from Poland said social media was, for many young people, their main source of news. “I was a big fan of social media when it was starting years ago, but it starts to scare me more and more,” she said. Algorithms led people into “a very weird parallel universe of information”.

Social media is not the only concern. Andrei from Romania lamented that the sophistication of those producing bogus news articles was increasing just as the quality of journalism and legitimate news portals was plummeting. “It only started hitting close to home when my own family members started sending me links to really bogus and really fake news articles,” he said.

The Older Generation Face Greater Risk

The generation gap is playing on the minds of many people in Europe. Our focus groups expressed concern for older people who, they felt, were the most at risk from misinformation and disinformation.

“Older generations are more inclined towards believing everything that’s online because we



in school are already made aware,” said Sophie from Belgium. Anne from Netherlands reflected that the certainties of the past had diminished as technology had become more sophisticated. “The older generation grew up with the idea that if it’s a photo, it’s hard proof,” she said. But that is no longer the case. “Because younger generations have grown up with the internet, they know how photos can be edited very easily how videos can be manipulated very easily.”

Márk from Hungary believed most young people had developed a method to differentiate the truth and fake news. “Whereas older people who were not born into the age of social media and the digital age, they lack this sort of critical thinking or the built-in methodology to differentiate.”

There were some dissenting voices who believed the dangers were far greater for younger people. Raluca from Romania highlighted that the under-15s were also at greater risk. “All of us in the middle, we are more aware of fake news, of how to tell which is real and which is not,” she said. “But younger generations and the older ones are not.”

“Here in Greece, I’ve met a lot of young people, my age or younger, who do have the digital literacy and still, they fall victim to disinformation and misinformation,” said Kleopatra. She suggested that Greece was generally a very open country, which could lead to complacency and a failure to recognise the danger.

Not Everyone Has the Time to Fact-Check

Even if people recognise the risk from bogus information, it is quite a leap to ask them to double-check all the information they receive. “We can’t judge every piece of information that we’re thrown because we’re thrown 10 pieces of information every time we open our phones,” said Simina from Romania. “There’s no way that we could ever stop fake media from developing. It’s always been there it’s just now it’s more out there because it’s online and more accessible.”

Fotios from Greece said the pandemic had seen him “bombarded” with information, describing much of it as “fake news”. “[We], the average citizens, maybe don’t have adequate knowledge to distinguish which of those are correct and which ones are not,” he said. “It’s one of the major problems [of] our times.”

“We can’t judge every piece of information that we’re thrown because we’re thrown 10 pieces of information every time we open our phones

Simina from Romania

Even when the knowledge is there, the will is not. “If I want to learn something I just maybe Google or search different sites,” said Anastasia from Greece. “Maybe I go with what seems more logical to me, trying to use my critical thinking.” She said, though, that this process can affect her mental health, especially when the news is relentlessly grim. “There’s so much information out there and so much negativity. I don’t want to fill my everyday life with hearing bad news.”

Several of the participants said they had simply stopped looking at news on social media during the pandemic. “I got rid of all social media,” said Markus from Germany. “I’m not going on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram. I used them to get the news. I totally switched to getting the news myself from news magazines.”

But some could see a positive in bringing the problem to light. Emi from Belgium flagged that Facebook, for example, had started to label false stories. And Daniel from Ireland suggested that that just having the debate about the reliability of information could be beneficial. “It’s not the worst thing in the world that people now talk about fake news,” he said. “At least now we’re aware of this, you can’t just read one news article and believe it.”

Dividing Truth From Lies May No Longer Be Possible

On one level, the problem of disinformation and misinformation is a practical one: who can we trust to tell us the truth? But Julia from Germany worries that it goes much deeper than that. She argues that the very distinctions and definitions we use no longer hold.

“I don’t think you can determine truth because truth is what you already believed,” she said. “I’m torn about it.” On the positive side, the idea of subjective truth empowers people in Ukraine to put a human face to war by streaming their daily lives on social media. “But I grew up in a system that was safe and I would love for there to be a ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ decision. I would love there to be a code of morals that we can strive towards.”

She added: “On social media you cannot discern what is the generally agreed upon fact. You can only see who is the loudest, who has the most viral video. You cannot make these determinations any more about what is a fact, what isn’t. This is where truth becomes not objective anymore. Everyone has their own truth.”

Sophie from Belgium agreed it had become incredibly difficult to discern a fact with 100 percent certainty. “Everything is somewhat biased, everything is somehow subjective,” she said, arguing that media was just reflecting the uncertainties of society. “Newspapers come from society, and nowadays people have a hard time separating what’s fact from what’s not. So logically this also transfers to the news. The news reinforces and re-creates that.”



How Much Trust Is Left in Traditional Institutions

The flow of false information is helping to undermine trust in traditional institutions, such as governments and traditional media. Governments and traditional media organisations are repeatedly accused of misleading the public. Social media companies are accused of profiteering from the confusion.

The participants in our focus groups identified several emerging patterns, particularly related to geography.

Eastern European governments were largely distrusted, whereas in other parts of Europe the level of trust depended on dynamics including the relative influence of capital cities, regional governments and local media.

An East-West Divide Emerges With Governments

Eastern European countries laboured for decades under Soviet or Soviet-backed regimes. The 1990s brought a promise of a brighter democratic future. But since then, the rot has set in. People from Hungary, Poland and Bulgaria were united in distrust of their governments.

“I am from Eastern Europe, which means that government news is an absolute no go,” said Ivo from Bulgaria. András from Hungary agreed wholeheartedly: “If I know that Hungarian authorities are communicating something, then I will immediately doubt it.” Arek from Poland said the government had captured the media and used it to pump out propaganda on all channels.



However, there was a notable exception. “In Estonia, most people trust the government and public institutions,” said Klaus. Other Estonians in the focus groups agreed. Klaus had a theory for trust in the media – it is such a small country that you often find yourself in the background of news reports. “So it’s really difficult to believe that this is all lies or propaganda when you have experienced the making of the news.”

Klaus mused that people in northern Europe seemed much more likely to trust their governments. Several participants in our focus groups backed up his theory – especially those from Germany.

“I don’t think the German government would ever put anything out that is wrong,” said Fabienne. Though she was quick to clarify that there were different kinds of “wrong”, and that she expected the government to put a positive spin on things without outright lying about them. Julia said she generally trusted the German government because she wanted to “believe in the relative strength of the democratic institutions”.

Further north, governments also scored highly. “I do have quite [a] high level of trust with the

Finnish government,” said Sofia. She has also lived in Britain and considered that her warmth towards Finland might be connected to her less than warm feelings towards the government in London. “I believe zero percent of what they say. I don’t trust them at all, and I don’t believe that they have the British public’s best interests at heart.”

Traditional Media Is Letting Audiences Down

While participants had clear feelings about their governments, the media proved to be a more slippery idea. Red flags should be raised, they said, if an article was badly formatted or badly written on a web portal you had never seen before. But most also felt that big media organisations were failing to tell the whole truth.

“Every media in some way or another has a hidden agenda,” said Anne from the Netherlands. She considered the BBC as a broadly neutral organisation. “But in Ukraine they support Ukraine against Russia,” she said. She suggested that such organisations were more trustworthy when reporting on their own territory but would reflect pro-Western views in global affairs.

“Every media in some way or another has a hidden agenda

Anne from the Netherlands

Kleopatra from Greece, however, made the opposite point. “Here, newspapers are clearly aligned with a certain party,” she said. “Same thing goes for TV channels. I don’t trust either.” As a result, she said she never consumed local media and was “out of the loop” with goings-on in Greece.

“Media outlets have always been partial to one point of view or another and we’ve always been prey to disinformation or specific points of view being fed to us,” she said. “The difference is that now we’ve become better at recognising it.”

Faced with a largely untrustworthy media in her own country, Kleopatra looks to international outlets such as the New York Times. “Do I trust it 100 percent? No, of course not,” she said, adding that she tried to look deeper into the stories she reads. “It’s part of our civic duty nowadays to be informed and to cross-check everything that we come across before we perpetuate something that might not be true.”

Ivo from Bulgaria goes to almost the opposite extreme, eschewing traditional media and government sources entirely. “I mostly trust independent journalists or underground news channels, such as Telegram groups,” he said. He takes news seriously and gives money to independent journalists. “I don’t trust people who have non-transparent revenue streams.”

Trust Is a Regional Issue Within Countries

Capital cities across Europe are regularly accused of centralising power and wealth away from other cities and rural areas. Participants reflected that this tendency had led to a lack of trust in central institutions and media organisations broadcasting from the capitals. Instead, trust could be found in regional bodies and local media.

This was particularly the case in Southern Europe. “Our governments for decades have been very centralising and so people think that most of the investment goes unfairly to Lisbon,” said Tomás from Portugal. “That creates a bit of friction between the regions and here in the north.”

He said this played out particularly with media organisations, where there was a clear north-south divide. A news channel that was set up in the northern city of Porto had quickly gained the respect of the people in the north, he said, regardless of its content. “Just because something is geographically positioned, it is immediately trustworthy.”

Others from Southern Europe agreed that local institutions were trusted more. Alba said the divide in Spain was between the central and regional authorities rather than a north-south split. She said people generally trusted the governments with regional identities – in Catalonia or the Basque country for example – over the Madrid government.

Michele, who lives on the island of Sardinia, reflected that Italy had similar dynamics to Spain.

“We are already geographically separated from the mainland,” he said. “The old people that are the main population here, they trust the regional news. They don’t even watch the national one.” However, in Estonia the dynamics were completely reversed. “When you are talking about people trusting local media more than national, in Estonia it’s rather the opposite,” said Mirjam. “Local media and newspapers, they exist, but I don’t know anyone who reads local newspapers. I feel like people really look at the nationwide news portals.”

Klaus said the divisions in Estonia tend to be along the lines of language. Those who speak Estonian trust the institutions, those who speak Russian do not.

As for Germany, participants could not identify any clear pattern. “When we’re speaking about the north, south, east, west divide, I was struggling to put Germany into there,” said Antonia. She could see pockets of people throughout the country who were prone to disinformation and misinformation.

The EU Is Popular but Its Impact Is Limited

Trustworthy but remote, or even murky. That is how participants felt about the European Union. “If the European Union is showing some information at least they base that on data or something that you can actually check,” said Arek from Poland.

He said the same was true of reliable media organisations and contrasted it with governments and lower quality news outlets. “You can’t even argue with them because they don’t even back it by anything. It’s just opinion against opinion,” he said.

A lot of the participants were quick to draw comparisons between the EU and their own governments. Sophie said she tended to trust EU institutions but found her government in Belgium too fractured, so having a clear opinion was tricky.

Mariavittoria said Italians liked to talk a lot, making her suspicious of local institutions and media. “I have the feeling that they just enter into the flow, and they want to say also

other things that maybe are not true but, since they are speaking, they go on and they add information,” she said. “About the EU, I think there are more filters with respect to the information that comes in and out. I trust European institutions more.”

For Kleopatra, the EU was more rigorous in verifying its statements and acted more cautiously than the government in Athens. While Joao from Portugal and Maria from Germany

both said they trusted the EU because they had simply never seen it pumping out any misinformation or disinformation.

Others were less convinced. Anne said the Dutch government was trustworthy but she was less sure about EU as it felt too remote. Julia from Germany agreed that the EU was too removed from everyday life and needed to think of more local forms of democracy – direct elections for the Commission president would help.



The Personal Impact of Disinformation

It might seem bizarre that many people believe health workers and scientists are involved in a conspiracy with governments and tech companies to implant chips into our brains. But that is one of the most common conspiracy theories about Covid vaccinations.

Few of the participants in our focus groups remained untouched by the conspiracy theories, disinformation and misinformation about the disease and the vaccines.

They have found that countering false narratives is tricky because believers do not need any evidence to accept such stories as the truth.

COVID Conspiracies Have Been Highly Convincing

The Covid-19 pandemic forced Simina from Romania to confront the idea that millions of people were now consuming a diet of pseudoscience and conspiracy theories online. “I’ve watched a video saying how, when you get the Covid vaccine you will have a chip in your brain,” she said. “It’s very entertaining but also very, very concerning.”

As a public health worker, she is accustomed to receiving bogus information about vaccines or other drugs. “Because we work in the field it’s

“What shocks me is the lack of judgement over information they get

Mariana from Slovenia

very easy for us to understand that the tests or the graphs that they're showing are fake," she said. "But it's such a complex topic that I could see how, if my grandma read that, she would definitely believe it."

Daniela from Germany agreed that some of the stories around Covid-19 were very convincing. She had seen traditional media pick up a story claiming that mRNA vaccines could reshape human DNA – an idea she described as totally impossible. "I think many people would have believed it," she said. "It was very professionally done with experts coming up and telling people random things that are not true."

Mariana told the focus group she was talking from her car in Slovenia and could see lines of people queuing for PCR tests because they refused to take the vaccine. "Most of the information that fuelled anti-vaxxers came from fake news," she said. "So I'm right now staring at a good example. What shocks me is the lack of judgement over information they get. It's blowing my mind right now."

“It hits home when your family members are sending you links and telling you that there are chips in the vaccines

Mirjam from Estonia

Family, Friends, Colleagues: All Fell Victim to Conspiracies

The conspiracy theory about chips hiding in vaccines was well-known among the participants. "A lot of people are prone to believing conspiracy theories in Estonia," said Mirjam. "It hits home when your family members are sending you links and telling you that there are chips in the vaccines."

Daniela from Germany had similar experiences. "My uncle, he is not vaccinated he doesn't

believe in vaccines, he doesn't believe in coronavirus," she said. "I'm a specialist in that field, and I still couldn't convince him to get vaccinated... Fake news was so dominating his daily news."

Joao said he was astounded at the way conspiracy theories, disinformation, and misinformation had spread in Portugal, highlighting the role of traditional media outlets in giving credibility to some of the hokum. One story alleging that PCR tests were unable to detect all Covid positive patients got a lot of traction. But the claim was totally false, he said, calling it an "out of this world" narrative.

"In a world of fast news and fast consumption, there's always a need to publish things as fast as you can," he said. "In order to do that, you skip some stages. That was clearly evident in the Covid-19 pandemic."

Julio from Spain was left flummoxed by his colleagues, who shared bogus content even though a very quick check would have shown it to be untrue. "There was a colleague of mine who was sharing (content from) a person who was a clear anti-vaxxer. You just needed to check, who is this author?"

However, other participants felt that Spain and Portugal had handled the situation better than other countries. “There aren’t as many people following those conspiracy theories here,” said Alba from Spain. “It’s not taken as seriously as I see in other European countries.”

Tomás said Portugal had avoided the worst of the conspiracy theories because people trusted doctors. “After the revolution in the 1970s, there was a big push for vaccines,” he said. “I think people still have a lot of that memory.”

Too Much Emotion, Too Few Facts

Anger and outrage help social media companies make huge profits. The more anger and outrage, the more engagement, the bigger the windfall from advertisers. “With people who share hoaxes and fake news is that those hoaxes and fake news have 99 percent very strong negative emotion,” said Milan from Slovakia. “No entertainment in that. It’s just anger and hate.”

Kleopatra from Greece found herself at the centre of this dynamic during a spell living in the United States when Black Lives Matter protests were sweeping the nation. “I woke up in

the morning and checked Twitter and there was a picture of dumpsters on fire,” she said. “The caption said protesters lit up those dumpsters and were trying to vandalise the city.”

It turns out that the picture had nothing to do with protests, it was from a lightning strike. “But it was too late,” she said. She had believed it, even though she is “meticulous” with information sources.

Anne from the Netherlands expands the point to the news media in general. “A lot of news headlines are just based on sensationalism and getting you to click to get the ad revenue,” she said. “They try to hit your feelings and get you to click to see if your feelings are right or wrong. It’s not about the news anymore.”

But targeting emotions is nothing new. Politicians have been doing it since the birth of modern campaigning. “I’ve been reading headlines that are misleading all my life,” said Julia from Germany. “I think of the whole Brexit campaign. I lived in the UK through some of that. When has there ever been anything more blatantly misleading?”

“I’ve been reading headlines that are misleading all my life

Julia from Germany

Sophie in Belgium reflected that the worlds of technology and politics were now colliding. “Political campaigns here in Belgium drop a lot of paid advertisements on Facebook, for example, and they really try to get to your feelings,” she said. “They use examples that only happen to one in a million people to say: ‘Oh look how bad your situation is.’ I feel that’s not representative of reality, so I feel like I have been duped.”

And the problem is compounded still further when trying to persuade loved ones to, for example, get vaccinated. Mirjam from Estonia said she had failed to convince her friends and family by using facts. “Social scientists say that it doesn’t work like that, you can’t convince a conspiracy theorist with facts, that you have to implore them with emotional arguments,” she said. “Which is ironic because we are dealing with facts.”



How Institutions Can Counter Disinformation

Europeans see the flow of false information as a perpetual challenge to their online lives. Could they do more to root out false information? Should governments to step in?

Although education and transparency are seen as crucial elements to any potential solution, all the approaches came with difficulties.

Any attempt to punish the media, for example, could quickly lead to state control and propaganda.

Show Your Sources... of Information and Funding

A problem that people felt plagues media and political institutions is a lack of transparency. It should be easy to answer questions like: Who is funding this party? Where does the information come from in this story? But all too often, the answers are elusive.

Andrei from Romania has an idea that would boost transparency among politicians. "I would

make all of them put their sponsors on their jackets, like Formula One race car drivers," he said, adding that the same could be done with journalists.

Tomás from Portugal wanted to see journalists citing their sources and up their game with explaining difficult to understand concepts. "Don't be afraid, even to use what can be seen as hard to understand words," he said. "Try to explain them, have an expert in-house to explain things."

Kleopatra from Greece said politicians and the media could learn from academia, when articles often have a section laying out the limitations of their research. Sophie from Belgium wanted to see better use of statistics by politicians. They should “clearly lay out the pros and cons” of any policy.

While most of the participants agreed that they would like to see more transparency and better citations in news stories, they also questioned whether such changes would really have an impact.

“I would like to have the sources cited, but this is a need from someone with a university and academic perspective,” said Alba from Spain. “What would you do with people who do not understand to this level?”

Maria from Germany said it was “always important that the media gives their sources.” But she added: “Most people probably don’t go to check out the sources and read it like a scientific study.”

Politics and Media Need to Reset

Flowing through all the debates around dis- and misinformation is the divide between those who

believe individuals need to critique the information they receive, and those who think institutions need to step in.

“Until there is a penalty for sharing misinformation, it will be the same,” said Michele from Italy, suggesting an official body could police the issue. Andrei from Romania took up that idea and ran with it. “I would literally outlaw TV channels, news outlets and journalists who in the past 10 years have stoked extremist views and have clearly lied to the public.” While accepting it was hard to do such things democracies, he reflected: “Extreme situations call for extreme measures.”

But plenty of other participants were squeamish about the idea of government action. Joao from Portugal pointed out that the media “is a business, they need to sell” and governments should not interfere in that. Daniela from Germany felt that imposing punishments on the media could easily lead to state control.

The people in our focus groups broadly agreed that institutions needed to play a role, but often focused on reform of these institutions themselves. Mariana in Slovenia suggested governments needed to start employing

specialists – health professionals in the health ministry, economists in the economy ministry – rather than party loyalists. “This is the foundation of being trustworthy,” she said. “Having someone who knows about (their subject). This is basic but we see many governments that don’t do it.”

Estonian Klaus said social media was the real enemy. “If you want to restore it our media environment and our information spaces to anything that is reasonable, that is not just full of conspiracy theories and information bubbles, then we really need to do something about the fact that so many people get their information and their news from social media,” he said.

“I believe that social media is one of the worst things that ever happened to our abilities to understand the world. It works to feed us what we essentially want, it finds out like greatest weaknesses and micro-targets us with the most optimal propaganda. It is like custom made for making us incredible radicalised and incredibly ill-informed.”

But he stopped short of proposing any ban or restrictions, arguing instead that it was down to individuals to limit their own use.

Education Is Good, but Not Guaranteed to Succeed

More education in media and technology literacy was generally regarded as a good thing among the participants of our focus groups, but they worried that just focusing on schools would not solve anything.

“For people who have grown up with the internet, we’ve seen all of the benefits but we’ve also seen the darker side,” said Daniel from Ireland. The older generations had less exposure and were more likely to trust a single source, he said, adding that it was doubly important to educate them because older people were more likely to vote in elections.

But Maria from Germany foresaw difficulties for any government trying to roll out education to older people. “Some people don’t trust the government, so that is a very difficult point... How would you convince these people?”

Joao from Portugal was in favour of education, but he too saw problems. “Thinking about short term results, like five years 10 years, I don’t think we’re going to see that much of a difference with education.”



Conclusions

Participants in our focus groups explained that they had been hit with “fake news” over Brexit, protests in the United States and the refugee crisis in Europe. In Bulgaria, Hungary and Poland, the government and media were considered completely unreliable even before the pandemic. But for most, it was Covid-19 that brought a relentless barrage of false information.

The main culprit in this rapid spread was social media. Few participants had anything good to say about the companies they regarded as profiting from amped-up, emotionally charged content. Governments and traditional media took plenty

of flak too. News reporters cutting corners, ministries playing politics, the EU remaining remote – all were flagged as problems.

As trust has drained from these institutions, the Europeans we spoke to were increasingly cautious about their sources of information. In Southern Europe, a tendency emerged to trust regional and local governments and news outlets. In Eastern Europe, participants tended to look overseas for reliable information, either to foreign news organisations or to the European Union. In the West and North, had more trust in national governments and traditional media.

The participants were passionate about the subject, several saying it was among the most vital of our era. And they were far from happy with the status quo. Looking forward, they agreed that more education and transparency were noble goals. But they were less optimistic that they could help create a future free from disinformation and misinformation. Any attempt to impose firm control over the flow of information ultimately led back to the age-old question: Who watches the watchers?