(English version)

Question for written answer E-000155/25
to the Commission
Sakis Arnaoutoglou (S&D)
(15 January 2025)

Subject: Misinformation and the role of bots — ensuring transparency and trust in the digital age

Misinformation and the spread of fake news, reinforced by the use of automated systems (bots), constitute grave threats to democracy. These practices erode transparency, undermine the reliability of information and reduce citizens' trust in it. Addressing this phenomenon is essential, and requires targeted measures. Society demands clear answers and substantive proposals that will ensure transparency and will reinforce the protection of democracy against the challenges of our modern times.

In view of the rapid spread of these practices and the importance of taking immediate and effective measures:

1. How does the Commission assess the effectiveness of the existing measures to combat misinformation, taking into account the ongoing development of technology and the increasing use of bots?

2. Does it consider that the mandatory identification of bots is a viable solution for strengthening transparency and accountability in the digital ecosystem? If not, what other approaches is it examining for the labelling and checking of automated activity?

3. What additional actions is the Commission planning in order to protect democracy from the malicious use of bots and to reinforce trust in digital information?

Submitted: 15.1.2025

Answer given by Executive Vice-President Virkkunen on behalf of the European Commission
(6 March 2025)

The Commission recognises the significant challenge posed by disinformation and the manipulative use of bots in the digital landscape.

Under the Digital Services Act ([1]) (DSA), providers of designated very large online platforms and search engines are required to assess and mitigate systemic risks.

Such risks may stem *inter alia* from the inauthentic use of their service, such as the creation of fake accounts, or the use of bots. The Commission has already launched formal proceedings under the DSA against X, Meta and TikTok connected to this.

On 13 February 2025, the Commission and the European Board for Digital Services ([2]) endorsed the official integration of the voluntary Code of Practice on Disinformation ([3]) into the framework of the DSA making it a Code of Conduct under Article 45.

The Code of Conduct foresees specific measures that signatories commit to take to address notably the malicious use of automated systems like bots ([4]).

This integration will make the Code a benchmark for determining platforms' compliance with the DSA. For providers of very large online platforms and search engines who are signatories to the Code, their commitments will be subject to annual independent audits.

Through the Horizon Europe programme ([5]), the Commission is also funding several research projects to help detection and countering of bot networks.

For example, among other functionalities, the VERA.AI ([6]) project aims to develop tools to identify patterns of synchronised activity where accounts share identical or similar content to amplify disinformation campaigns.

Finally, the Commission will propose a European Democracy Shield, as a horizontal strategic framework to better protect and promote democracy in the EU.

([1]) https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM:4625430
([2]) https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/dsa-board
([3]) https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/code-practice-disinformation
([4]) https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/code-conduct-disinformation
([5]) https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe_en
([6]) 'VERification Assisted by Artificial Intelligence': https://www.veraai.eu/home

It will notably address foreign informational manipulation and interference and disinformation.