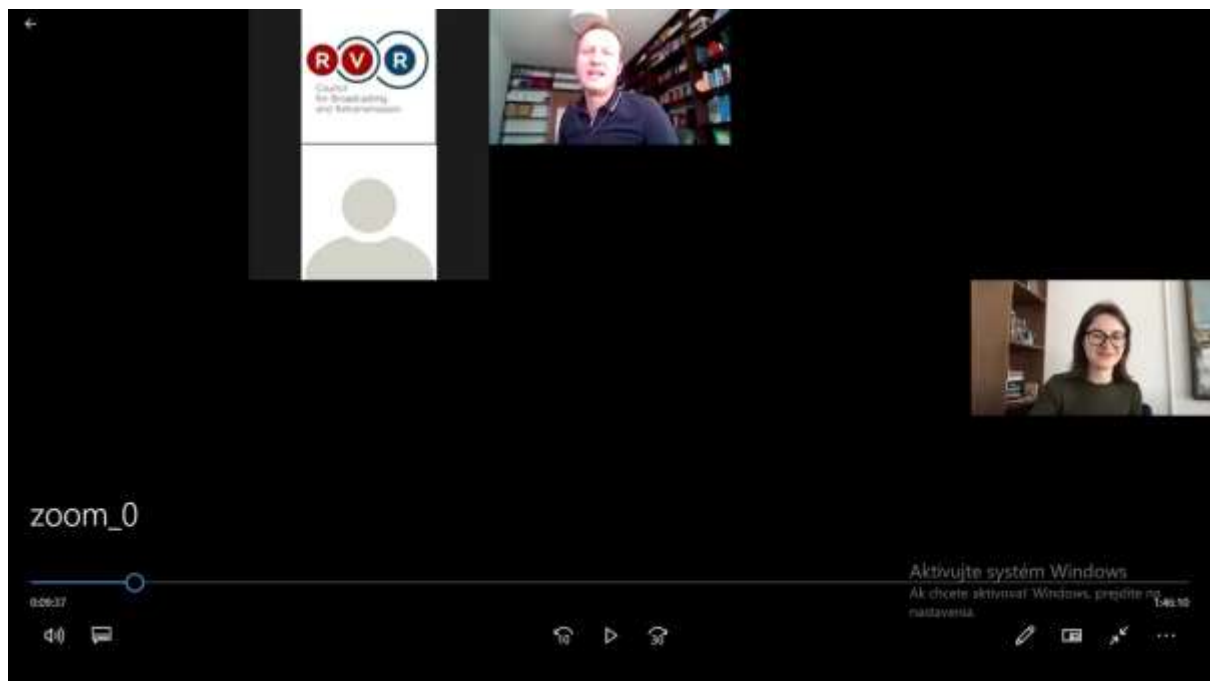


## COVID-19-related disinformation on social media platforms and ways to tackle it

*30 April 2020*

Bratislava – On 14 April, the [Slovak Council for Broadcasting and Retransmission](#) and [MEMO 98](#) organized a webinar to discuss how to counter the spread of COVID-19-related disinformation on Facebook, Google, and Twitter and ways to tackle it. More than 100 people registered before the event, which indicated a high level of interest as well as the relevance of the topic. As many as 90 participants, including media regulators, experts on disinformation, journalists, academia, interested CSOs, donors, and others, joined the webinar.



The Council and MEMO 98 both have experience with monitoring social media during elections. However, while disinformation during elections impacts its integrity, during the pandemic, it could impact our ability to survive. This is why today, it is even more important than at other times that people, including most vulnerable audiences, have access to relevant and objective information. In an era of ever-evolving challenges related to the pandemic, disinformation takes center stage as a crucial issue in the current situation.

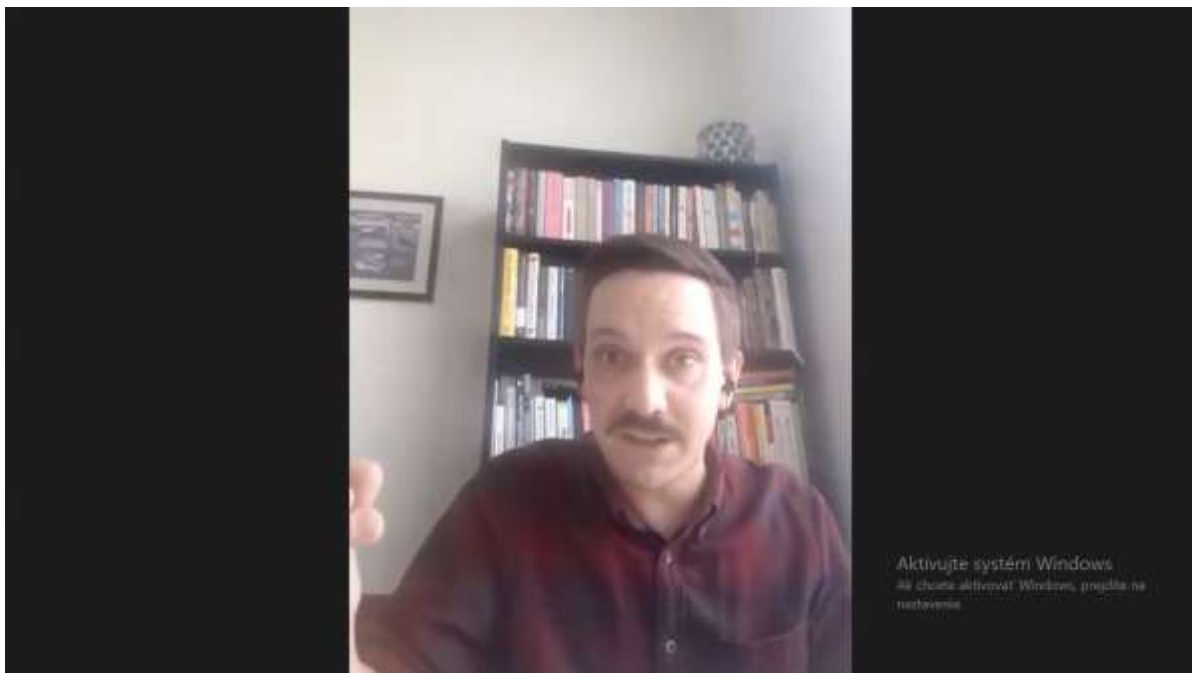


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**Eliška Pírková, Access Now: It is essential to uphold fundamental human rights in the time of the health crisis**

The *Europe Policy Analyst* at [Access Now](#) Eliška Pírková introduced the work of her organizations and talked about the dangers of instrumentalizing the COVID-19 situation for significant restrictions of free expression, access to information, and other fundamental rights. It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every part of our lives, including our human rights, but privacy, free expression, access to information, and other fundamental rights are even more essential in times of crisis. We at Access Now are working to ensure responses to COVID-19 strengthen rather than undermine those rights.



**Milan Zubíček, Google: We are committed to helping people around the world discover timely, trustworthy, and useful information.**

Google's EU Government Affairs and Public Policy Manager Milan Zubíček talked about what Google and YouTube have been doing to help people discover trustworthy and useful information as the COVID-19 pandemic evolves. Firstly, Google and YouTube always seek to give users relevant and reliable information from authoritative sources (for example, [SOS Alerts](#) and [new, improved Search experience](#)); this is particularly true for searches that pertain to topics that are sensitive for users like health information (). Secondly, Google and YouTube are protecting users from misinformation and abuse. That includes prohibiting dangerous remedies or cures on YouTube, protecting users against price gouging and harmful products, and limiting who can advertise on Google's advertising platform, and enforcing policies against harmful medical or health-related content on Google Play. The third area includes cooperation with Google's partners, such as governments, health authorities, researchers, NGOs, journalists, fact-checking communities, and the European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services ([ERGA](#)). Google is also providing \$250 million in donated ad grants to the WHO and government agencies. All blog posts that describe Google's wider response to COVID-19 are available [under this link](#).



### **Kateryna Kruk, Facebook: We remove misinformation that contributes to the risk of imminent violence or physical harm**

The *Public Policy Manager* at Facebook Kateryna Kruk explained what Facebook is doing to keep people safe and informed during the coronavirus public health crisis. For example, to provide users with reliable and factual information, Facebook established an [information center](#) that includes real-time updates from national health authorities and global organizations such as the World Health Organization, as well as helpful articles, videos, and posts about social distancing and preventing the spread of COVID-19. Additionally, Facebook supports health organizations with free ads and empowers partners with data and tools.

Facebook removes COVID-19 related misinformation that could contribute to imminent physical harm, like false claims about cures, treatments, the availability of essential services, or the location and severity of the outbreak. Facebook regularly updates the claims that it removes based on the guidance from the WHO and other health authorities. Additionally, Facebook works with over 60 fact-checking organizations that review and rate content in more than 50 languages around the world. Once a piece of content is rated false by fact-checkers, Facebook reduces its distribution and shows warning labels with more context.



**Ronan Costello, Twitter: Our misinformation policy around C-19 is focused on false claims with potential for offline harm**

The Public Policy Manager at Twitter, Ronan Costello, mentioned that their efforts around C-19 and, in general, around elections (or any other issues of public importance), was to ensure that the conversation on the platform is as healthy as possible. Also, Twitter encourages healthy civic participation in the public conversation and amplifies reliable information through the verification of accounts and by curating Moments in its Explore tab. Twitter has focused on combating misinformation by providing philanthropic assistance to public health relief efforts – it has offered over \$800,000 in advertising grants to service this goal. Moreover, Twitter launched a COVID-19 [search prompt in over 70 countries](#) – when users search for terms related to COVID-19, they're first directed to national health authorities for verified information. The platform's misinformation policy around C19 is to focus specifically on false claims that have the potential to cause offline harm. You can see Twitter's updated policy [here](#).



**Grégorie Polad, ACT: With great power comes great responsibility. One fact-checker for more than 70,000 users is not enough.**

At the beginning of his presentation, Grégorie Polad of the Association of Commercial Television in Europe (ACT) expressed gratitude to all health professionals and journalists. When commenting on the efforts taken by Google, Facebook, and Twitter, he said he was delighted to see some of the measures taken by them to stop the dissemination of disinformation. Given the previous position of the platforms claiming that such measures were impossible or difficult to implement, Grégorie Polad found it surprising that it was possible to implement them now, which, according to him, shows that if there is the will there is the way.

Grégorie Polad: “If anything, this crisis indicates that more than ever, the role and responsibility of such platforms show their role as publishers and possibly as public utilities. While the steps taken by these platforms to curb online disinformation, if anything, this shows that the EU cannot rely just on the goodwill of such platforms. We need rules, regulations, clear KPIs, human reviewers, and sanctions that create true incentives to act. Platforms are not above the law, and community standards and Terms&Conditions cannot replace regulations. AI solutions will never be as good as having hired human reviewers and content moderators acting under legally sanctioned editorial responsibility standards, with an understanding of the local context. I have heard in the past that companies such as Facebook have up to 35.000 people doing this job and I know this seems a lot, but unfortunately, if you divide this number by 2.5 billion active Facebook users, it means that there is one fact-checker for 71.428 users - clearly, this is never going to be sufficient. When broadcasters make a mistake, they usually end up paying a fine – unfortunately, when the platforms harbor disinformation that goes viral, they actually end up making a profit. This cannot continue. Coming back to my initial point, this crisis shows that these platforms have become public utilities. With great power comes great responsibility, not just community standards. As such, we need action and regulation in the



short and long term to ensure public safety, to protect our democratic discourse and the rights of citizens and consumers to be upheld.”



### **Maria Donde, Ofcom: In the time of crisis, people watch broadcast TV news**

The Head of International Content Policy at Ofcom Maria Donde talked about the work of the UK media regulator in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. More specifically, Ofcom monitors the wider industry metrix around C19. Maria Donde: “One of the most extraordinary results that we have seen based on the TV monitoring analysis in the UK is a 92 % year-on-year increase in people watching broadcast TV news which tells us a lot what people want as their source of information in the critical situation as this.” Other findings of the [analysis](#) titled *Covid-19 news and information: consumption and attitudes* include:

- In the first week of the ‘lockdown’, almost all the UK online population (99%) accessed news and information about Covid-19 at least once a day. One quarter (24%) said they were getting news 20 or more times a day.
- BBC services are the most-used source by some margin (see Figure 1). Four in five (82%) say they use the BBC as a source of news/info. Just over half use non-BBC broadcasters (56%), followed by officials (52%), social media (49%), the press either online or printed (43%) and family, friends or local people (42%). 15% say they use closed groups, such as WhatsApp groups and Facebook messenger.

As a response to the Covid-19 outbreak, Ofcom is providing a range of information about how people are getting news and information about the crisis. Ofcom is publishing this under their [media literacy duties, as part of our Making Sense of Media programme](#). This work

further Ofcom's understanding around the access, consumption, and critical engagement with news at this time, recognizing that habits may intensify or change, given the nature of the crisis. For the pre-Covid-19 news consumption and attitudes, you can see Ofcom's [News Consumption Survey](#). Given the increased concern about misinformation during this time, Ofcom is also [providing information about fact-checking and debunking sites and tools](#).



### **Francesco Sciacchitano, AGCOM: We need to get better data from the platforms**

The senior legal expert at AGCOM Francesco Sciacchitano presented the results of the work done by the European platform of audiovisual regulators (ERGA), which in 2019 was entrusted with the task of monitoring the implementation of the provisions of the [Code of Practice on Disinformation](#) launched in October 2018. Mr Sciacchitano recognized that the platforms made significant efforts to counter disinformation and to comply with the Code's pillars, but acknowledged that the Code has significant weaknesses that need to be addressed if the Code is to achieve its goal: the main problem is that there is a need for greater transparency including much more detailed data about how the signatories are implementing the Code; the transparency reports by the platforms only contain aggregated data for the whole European Union, but very little data on the activities carried out at the national level, and this makes it extremely difficult for ERGA to monitor this aggregated data.

Other problems that were identified are the following:

- some of the measures under the Code are too general in nature and are not uniformly enacted by all signatories;
- the number of signatories of the Code is limited and does not include some important platforms, information and communication services, and actors from the advertising industry that are active in the EU

In conclusion, while the current self-regulatory model proved to be an important and necessary first step, in order to be more effective to counter disinformation online, the report proposes a move towards a more structured co-regulation and proposes concrete recommendations as a way forward. ERGA will publish its monitoring report in two-three weeks from now.



**Carlos Perez-Maestro, European Commission: Disinformation on social media platforms during the C-19 pandemic can cause physical harm**

Carlos Perez-Maestro of the European Commission (DG CONNECT- Media Convergence & Social Media) mentioned that during the pandemic, the European Commission has very close contact with the platforms as everyone understands how important it is in this situation. According to him, it is not only that spreading disinformation can create distrust in public authorities, but people can experience physical harm. The general framework of the EU relationship with the platforms is laid out in the Code of Practice on Disinformation, and the Commission continues to monitor how the platforms implement the Code in the current situation. Carlos Perez-Maestro also mentioned the importance of:

- avoiding that some people will make money out of the current crisis e.g., online scams, overinflated prices and misleading advertising of products ;
- avoiding to misuse the platforms (e.g., fake accounts) to distribute disinformation;
- providing users with access to trustworthy information (WHO and local health institutions)
- taking down illegal content which could cause physical harm





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The discussion was moderated by Ľuboš Kukliš, the Chief Executive of the Council for Broadcasting and Retransmission and Rast'o Kužel, the Executive Director of MEMO 98.

### **Mentioned resources:**

#### **Facebook:**

- Blogposts on COVID-19: <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/05/coronavirus/>
- Transparency report on community standards enforcement: <https://transparency.facebook.com/community-standards-enforcement>
- Data for Good: <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/04/data-for-good/>

#### **Google:**

- Blogposts on COVID-19: <https://blog.google/inside-google/company-announcements/googles-response-covid-19/>
- Support to journalists and news industry: [Journalism Emergency Relief Fund, support to Fact-checkers, Google News Initiative, Google.org support](#)

#### **Twitter:**

- Blogposts on COVID-19: [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2020/covid-19.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/covid-19.html)
- Data hub for academic research: <https://developer.twitter.com/en/use-cases/academic-researchers>

#### **Access Now:**

- Resource website: <https://www.accessnow.org/issue/covid-19/>

#### **EU DisinfoLab:**



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- Resources: <https://www.disinfo.eu/coronavirus>
- Study on conspiracy theories and 5G: <https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/coronavirus-and-5g-a-case-study-of-platforms-content-moderation-of-conspiracy-theories>

#### **Ofcom:**

- Ofcom research: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/tv-radio-and-on-demand/news-media/coronavirus-news-consumption-attitudes-behaviour>
- Factual resources: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/coronavirus-resources>

#### ERGA:

- Reaction to COVID-19: <http://erga-online.eu/?p=668>
- Report on Report on the intermediate monitoring of the Code of practice on disinformation: [http://erga-online.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ERGA-2019-06\\_Report-intermediate-monitoring-Code-of-Practice-on-disinformation.pdf](http://erga-online.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ERGA-2019-06_Report-intermediate-monitoring-Code-of-Practice-on-disinformation.pdf)

#### **Reuters Institute:**

- Navigating the 'infodemic' report: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/infodemic-how-people-six-countries-access-and-rate-news-and-information-about-coronaviru>

The webinar report in pdf: [c-19-disinfo-webinar\\_final](#)